

RULES OF THUMB

Many points about effective sentences can be stated as general maxims.

The writing tips in this chapter are loosely organized and may repeat material from other chapters. But all are highly practical. One or two may be just the quick fix you need.

1. START MOST SENTENCES WITH THE SUBJECT

The usual order of sentence elements is subject-verb-complement, and good writers structure most of their sentences this way. The subject is (or should be) what the sentence is about. Bringing it immediately to the reader's attention makes for clear communication and helps your sentences sound natural and unaffected. A quick survey of professional writers' work in good popular magazines and books suggests that they begin about two-thirds of their sentences with the subject. That's a good percentage of subject-first sentences to keep in mind when you write.

When professional writers put something other than the subject first, it's generally an adverbial, usually a prepositional phrase, a sentence modifier, or an adverbial clause:

In July, Blevins announced another new theory, (prepositional phrase)

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Thanks to acid rain whole mountainsides are covered with ghost forests of dead trees, (sentence modifier)

Although the proposal passed, the margin was slim, (adverbial clause)

You should generally avoid sentences that open with long modifying phrases or clauses and sentences that invert the normal sentence order:

Originating in the 1920's and dominating public architecture during the '50s and '60s was the angular and severely functional international style. (This sentence puts the complements first, then the

verb, then the subject, international style.)

A nonmetallic element discovered in 1811 by Bernard Courtois and the least active halogen, iodine has important medicinal and industrial uses. (The subject, iodine, is preceded by a long appositive phrase.)

While sentences like these may occasionally provide welcome variety, most can be improved by rewriting to put the subject first. Others

can be broken into two or more sentences, each with a subject of its own:

The angular and severely functional international style originated in the 1920's and dominated public architecture during the '50s and '60s.

The nonmetallic element iodine was discovered in 1811 by Bernard Courtois. Iodine, the least active halogen, has important medicinal and industrial uses.

----- Exercise 1 -----

Rewrite the following sentences to put the subject at or near the beginning. Start at least one of your revisions with a short adverbial phrase

or clause. In another, break the original sentence in two. What effect do your changes have on the writer's voice? 1

1. Years after founding phenomenology, a painstaking philosophical study of the laws governing conscious experience, Edmund

Husserl concluded objects had no existence outside the mind.

2. Outgrowths of follicles arranged in certain tracts and forming a protective, decorative, and functional layer outside the skin, birds' feathers may have evolved from the scales of Mesozoic reptiles.

3. Because the United States resolutely maintained neutrality during the conflicts between France and Britain brought about by

the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars and because

the angry British began to impress American sailors and confiscate American cargoes in retaliation, the War of 1812 began.

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2. MAKE YOUR SUBJECTS DEFINITELY NAMED ACTORS

There are two points to remember here: you should name the subject of each sentence clearly, and your subjects should be well chosen—the true doers of the actions you’re discussing, not just a related idea.

Whenever possible these subject-actors should be people.

Suppose you were writing a sentence about Martinique in the West

Indies and wanted to explain that French settlers exterminated the native Indians, replacing them with African slaves. Unless you had a special purpose—like recounting European crimes against native Americans—your best subject would probably be the obvious one, French

settlers. Don’t say

European interests exterminated the native Carib Indians and replaced them with African slaves.

French settlers is much more precise than European interests.

Choosing nominalizations (nouns made from verbs) for your subjects or using passive constructions (in which instead of doing something the subject has something done to it) makes the sentence even less effective:

Extermination of the native Carib Indians and their replacement with African slaves was the work of French settlers, (nominalized subjects in italics)

The native Carib Indians were exterminated and African slaves were brought in by French settlers, (passive verbs in italics)

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The best way around all these faulty choices is to pick a subject that clearly identifies the real actor you have in mind along with active verbs that plainly say what the subject did:

French settlers exterminated the native Carib Indians and replaced them with African slaves.

3. MAKE YOUR VERBS NAME DEFINITE ACTIONS

Strong verbs name definite actions—not always physical actions like hit or kick, but ones with clear meanings: deceive, rationalize, insist, tolerate. Avoid weak verbs like concern, establish, or have that are often used in vague ways, and be especially leery of the weakest of them all, to be. If weak verbs are undermining your writing, replace at least half of them with stronger choices:

Not

Poverty is an important factor in most social problems.

But

Most social problems feed on poverty.

Not

We acknowledge a need to establish why the mine explosion occurred.

But

We need to know why the mine exploded.

----- Exercise 2 -----

Revise the following sentences to provide more definite and expressive actors and actions. If the original wording is so vague you can't tell what it means, make up your own specific meanings. How do your revisions change the writer's voice? (Actors and actions to be replaced appear in italics.)

1. Certain parties have indicated that there may be problems with the way *airbags* deploy in various models in our product line.
2. A major recording artist has developed a promising marketing concept related to her latest album.
3. Native peoples were introduced to European disorders and, lacking antibodies to control these, succumbed in disproportionate numbers.

4. WRITE MOSTLY IN INDEPENDENT CLAUSES

More than half of your sentences should be composed of one or more independent clauses able to stand by themselves as separate sentences.

And as a general rule, none of your sentences should have more than three dependent clauses, or clauses that need to be attached to an independent clause in order to be complete. Dependent clauses have a

grammatical function within another clause. They may function as nouns (“Ivan wouldn’t say what was wrong”), adjectives (“The one that I like best is blue”), or adverbs (“They checked their inventory while we waited”). They don’t make sense on their own.

In his book *A Writer's Companion* Richard Marius analyzes samples of good popular writing to show the number of dependent clauses in each. Examining 95 sentences from current magazines and books,

Marius found only 56 dependent clauses. More important, 65 of the sentences—roughly 70 percent—contained no dependent clauses. No sentence contained more than three dependent clauses.

My own two-hour survey confirmed Marius’ results, but I did find a sentence with five dependent clauses in a guide to the *Iliad*. It’s pretty bad. The author mentions that Aithra, the mother of Theseus, appears in Troy as a handmaid to Helen and her presence requires an explanation.

Then he goes on (dependent clauses in brackets):

This was forthcoming in the story, known as early as the epic cycle, [that [when Helen was carried off by Theseus and Perithos, some time [before she married Menelaos,] her brothers Kastor and Polydeukes rescued her]] and, [while doing so, they carried off in reprisal Theseus’ mother Aithra,] [who thus became a slave of Helen.]

Malcolm M. Willcock, *A C o m p a n i o n t o t h e I l i a d*

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Willcock is a good writer, and this sentence is not typical of his work, but it could certainly stand simplifying. To improve a logjam like this, divide it into several sentences, removing some of the dependent clauses

in the process (dependent clauses in brackets):

This was forthcoming in a story known as early as the epic cycle. Some time before her marriage to Menelaos, Helen had been carried off by

Theseus and Perithoos. [When her brothers, Kastor and Polydeukes, rescued her,] they also carried off in reprisal Theseus' mother, Aithra. Aithra

thus became a slave of Helen.

Instead of one sentence with five dependent clauses, the revision offers

four sentences with one dependent clause. There is no loss of content

and a large gain in readability. This sort of simplification works wonders when dependent clauses pile up too deeply.

----- Exercise 3 -----

Rewrite the following sentences to eliminate half the dependent clauses (in brackets). Change the sentence structure however you like but keep all the major ideas of the originals. Feel free to create new sentences.

How do your revisions change the writer's voice?

1. [Because some welfare recipients [who had poor work histories] and [who could make only minimum wages] chose to stay on public assistance indefinitely in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin,] authorities designed a program, [which is called "Work Not

Welfare,") to make [people [they considered to be welfaredependent] take charge of their own lives.]

2. [When the program took effect] recipients [who had been on welfare a long time] were told [that they had only two years [in which they could continue to receive benefits]] and [that they had to earn those remaining benefits by performing services [that helped their neighbors and other citizens.]] 3

3. [Although the program appears to be working for people [who have cooperated with social workers and educators [who have trained them for jobs [which have a future,]]]] costs for training, child care, and other expenses proved far higher [than officials expected,] and many targeted individuals have not cooperated

[because they didn't believe [they could ever hold a good job]]

or [because they simply didn't want to.]

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5. KEEP SUBJECTS AND VERBS CLOSE TOGETHER

The vital actor/action relationship between subjects and verbs needs to be as plain as you can make it. Long interruptions between subjects and verbs put readers on hold while they wait for the thought to be completed. The best revision is usually to move the interrupting element to the beginning or the end of the sentence:

Not

Our objective, after we have taken the time to define it clearly and draft a plan of action to bring it about, will be paramount.

But

After we have taken the time to define our objective clearly and draft a plan of action to bring it about, it will be paramount.

Or

Our objective will be paramount after we have taken the time to define it clearly and draft a plan of action to bring it about.

Another revision technique is to shunt the interrupter off into a sentence of its own:

We must first define our objective clearly and draft a plan of action to bring it about. Then the objective itself will be paramount.

6. KEEP VERBS AND COMPLEMENTS CLOSE TOGETHER

Verbs sometimes appear by themselves ("Che lives!"), but they are more often followed by adverbials ("Che lives in Bolivia"), objects ("Che lives the life of a hermit"), or subject complements ("Che seems content").

Don't let long interrupters come between your verbs and these completing elements. Move them to the beginning or end of the sentence or

give them sentences of their own:

Not

The Mau Mau uprising in Kenya resulted after a series of highly publicized attacks on Europeans in the relocation of the Kikuyu tribe.

But

After a series of highly publicized attacks on Europeans, the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya resulted in the relocation of the Kikuyu tribe.

Or

The Mau Mau uprising in Kenya resulted in the relocation of the Kikuyu tribe after a series of highly publicized attacks on Europeans.

Or

The Mau Mau uprising in Kenya involved a series of highly publicized attacks on Europeans. These attacks resulted in the relocation of the Kikuyu tribe.

----- Exercise 4 -----

The sentences that follow are marred by awkward interrupters. Revise them in one of the three classic ways: (1) move the interrupter to the beginning of the sentence, (2) move it to the end, or (3) give it a sentence of its own.

1. Impedance—the degree to which a circuit resists the flow of electric current, a resistance factor expressed as ohms—is sometimes increased by capacitors.

2. Wanda Landowska is responsible through her work as a concert artist and teacher, especially at the Ecole de Musique Ancienne, which she founded, for much of our present interest in the harpsichord. 3

3. Jefferson complained, and he maintained this complaint to the end of his life with bitterness that only increased as he grew older, that revisions forced on his Declaration of Independence by the Second Continental Congress left it a weaker document.

7. USE SINGLE VERBS WITH MULTIPLE SUBJECTS. USE
SINGLE SUBJECTS WITH MULTIPLE VERBS

Multiple subjects followed by multiple verbs usually add up to too many ideas to sort out easily. Simplify the subject or the verb:

Not

Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton threatened and cajoled the Pentagon's big spenders.

But

Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton threatened the Pentagon's big spenders. When this failed they tried to cajole them.

Or

Jimmy Carter threatened and cajoled the Pentagon's big spenders. So did Bill Clinton.

8. FAVOR THE ACTIVE VOICE

Cast most of your sentences in the active voice so that the subject does something rather than has something done to it. Passive constructions can be useful when it doesn't matter who performs a certain action ("Foods high in saturated fat should be avoided") or when you want to emphasize results regardless of who brought them about ("As if bloody civil war weren't enough, Angola was ravaged by AIDS"). But most sentences gain force and directness with active verbs:

Not

The Fourth of July is regarded as our chief secular holiday by most Americans.

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But

Most Americans regard the Fourth of July as our chief secular holiday.

9. CHOOSE POSITIVE RATHER THAN NEGATIVE

CONSTRUCTIONS

You save words and communicate more directly when you say what something is rather than what it isn't:

Not

She was not without charm.

And certainly not

She was not uncharming.

But

She was charming.

You may be tempted to use negative constructions and weak verbs to soften a disagreeable truth. It's usually best to resist:

Not

The company is frequently not in compliance with accepted accounting standards.

But

The company frequently violates accepted accounting standards.

----- Exercise 5 -----

Revise the following sentences to avoid pairing multiple subjects with multiple verbs, to make passive verbs active, and to replace negative

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constructions with positive ones. Sentences may have more than one problem to correct. How do your revisions change the writer's voice?

1. Sally, her mother, and her cousins wandered through

Charleston's historic district, shopped for souvenirs, and had

lunch near the water.

2. The university has not been placed under sanctions by any agency but the NCAA.

3. The foil, the epee, and the saber—weapons used in sport fencing—are not without an evolutionary relationship to swords

once used in actual combat.

10. FOCUS EACH SENTENCE ON THE IDEAS EXPRESSED

BY THE SUBJECT AND PREDICATE

A predicate consists of a verb plus the modifiers, objects, and complements that go with it. Together, the subject and predicate make a complete idea, which everything else in the sentence should support.

Don't

let unrelated material pull the sentence too far from this central utterance:

Alabama, whose economy was nearly ruined by a boll weevil infestation during the early twentieth century, is a hotbed of stock car racing mania.

The core statement here is "Alabama is a hotbed of stock car racing mania." Unless nearby sentences somehow connect stock car racing with the ravages of the boll weevil, readers will find the digression illogical and confusing. Find the boll weevil a home in a new sentence or eliminate him altogether.

11. MIX LONG AND SHORT SENTENCES

Readers look for the chief actors and actions in each sentence, and these are harder to find in long sentences than in short ones. It doesn't take many long sentences to beat readers down.

Inside a small cubical enclosure within the Great Mosque at Mecca, rests the Kaaba, or Black Stone, the most highly venerated object in the Muslim

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world and the destination of devout believers' pilgrimages, occupying much the same location it had before the coming of Muhammad, when it was sacred to pagan sects of undetermined antiquity. Infidels are strictly forbidden to approach it.

A page of sentences like the first one would give anyone a headache.

Combining such sentences with short follow-ups like "Infidels are strictly forbidden to approach it" helps by giving readers a chance to catch their breath.

On the other hand, too many short, simple sentences in a row are as

bad as a page full of excessively long ones. One short sentence after another makes writing sound simpleminded, like the uncombined kernel

sentences in Chapter 10:

There is a small cubical enclosure within the Great Mosque at Mecca.

Here rests the Kaaba. It is also called the Black Stone. It is the most highly venerated object in the Muslim world. Moreover, it is the destination of devout believers' pilgrimages. It occupies an ancient location. It

was there before Muhammad arrived. It was sacred to pagan sects. Infidels are strictly forbidden to approach it.

Even if you chose not to shoehorn all this material into one huge sentence, you could combine it into two and still add the short follow-up

for contrast:

Inside a small cubical enclosure within the Great Mosque at Mecca, rests the Kaaba, or Black Stone, the most highly venerated object in the Muslim world. The stone, which is the destination of devout believers' pilgrimages, occupies much the same location it had before the coming of

Muhammad, when it was sacred to pagan sects of undetermined antiquity.

Infidels are strictly forbidden to approach it.

The point is to combine long and short sentences to give readers the variety they need to stay interested and involved in what you're saying.

Remember, this advice applies to breath units—the words spoken together between pauses in a sentence—as well as to sentences themselves.

In the final revision of the Great Mosque sentence above, the phrases

“or Black Stone” and “The stone” are very short breath units that contrast with the longer units around them.

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12. END SENTENCES WITH A BANG, NOT A WHIMPER

The final few words of a sentence most often receive the greatest emphasis, so it pays to put ideas you most want to leave in readers' minds

at the ends of sentences. Imagine you were trying to convince readers that your firm would be the best choice to underwrite a stock offering because of its history of underwriting successes. You'd want to use the principle of end focus to place your firm's experience in the position of emphasis:

Not

We have more underwriting experience than any other firm in the area.

But

No other firm in the area can match our underwriting experience.

----- Exercise 6 -----

Revise the following sentences as directed. How do your revisions change the writer's voice?

1. As Nelson bent over her tiny hand a cloud (a towering cumulonimbus, or thunderhead) suddenly obscured the sun. (Remove

the digression and use end focus to emphasize her tiny hand.)

2. Social thinkers considered gin, made from fermented cereal grains and flavored with juniper berries, the scourge of the poor in eighteenth-century London, where gin shops dispensed cheap

drinks to a laboring populace so degraded by brutal living conditions that only the oblivion of drunken stupor could relieve

them from what Doctor Samuel Johnson called "the pain of being human." (Remove the digression; break up to provide a short contrasting sentence.)

3. Three sects of Jews have called themselves Hasidim, starting with the conservative pre-Christian group whose resistance to outside forces in Israel culminated in the revolt of the

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Maccabees, then going on to a community of twelfth- and thirteenth-century mystics in Germany, and finally to the present

movement, begun in Poland but now spread throughout the

world, which emphasizes individual goodness over strict observance of rabbinical law. (Break into three or four sentences with

some contrast in length.)

----- Rules Makeover -----

Use the writing tips from this chapter to revise the passage that follows.

How do your revisions change the writer's voice?

Under the principles of feng-shui, or “wind and water,” a system for choosing building sites that dates from the Han Dynasty (202 b.c. - a.d. 220), the Chinese—the world's most populous nation—developed what could be called a tradition of mystical surveying. This

group, whose country is physically the third largest in the world, adapted themes from their three great religions—Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism—which included such things as the yin and yang of Taoism, the five directions and five elements of Buddhism, and the 64 hexagrams of the Confucian I-Ching, along with astrological lore, to determine the most auspicious locations for public buildings and private homes. Before building began, a consultant called a feng-shui hsien sheng, or “doctor of the vital force,” was called in to assess the landscape and lay out the site by studying the shape of surrounding peaks and hills, the location of boulders, the direction of streams and prevailing winds, and other factors in order to pick out a site that was aligned in various ways with the vital forces of the setting, the seasons, the elements, and the stars. Sometimes the site would be altered

on the basis of the feng-shui hsien sheng's findings to obtain results that would not have been possible without human intervention. Trees would be planted, streams diverted, boulders moved, even hills reshaped in an effort to manipulate feng-shui values so that a building could be placed where the owner wanted it without incurring the risk of evil forces and bad luck. Some have become convinced that the well-known Chinese expertise in gardening can be traced to these early efforts to alter the feng-shui values of building sites.

Based on World Rhythms by Ryszard Wójcicki. *The Most Beautiful House in the World*

CHAPTER 6

COHERENCE

Fitting Sentences Together

MAINTAINING RELATED GRAMMATICAL SUBJECTS

Except in textbooks, sentences rarely stand alone. Most interact with other

statements around them to form sustained discourse, which must be coherent if it is to reflect the forward sweep of the writer's thinking. Each

sentence must connect with the others to help readers follow a developing thought the writer wants to convey. All the points concerning individual sentences in later chapters should be thought of in light of this

central need to make consistent sense. Fortunately, most of the techniques

that make writing cohere are not difficult to employ once they're pointed

out. Consider this workmanlike if mildly unappetizing discussion:

No matter how unpretentious and simple or how fancifully adorned, terrines, pates, and galantines are basically composed of a forcemeat cooked

in some sort of wrapping. Forcemeat, called farce in French, is finely or coarsely chopped, ground, or pureed meat, poultry, or fish, seasoned and bound with egg, cream, bread, or a combination of the three. It may be layered with strips or pieces of meat, livers, sweetbreads, fat, vegetables, or truffle to vary color, texture, and taste. The wrapping may be caul fat, fatback, bacon strips, salt pork, pastry crust, fish fillets, grape leaves, or, as sometimes in the case of galantines, the skin of the animal.

Victoria Wish. *America's Characterie*

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You begin this passage with little idea of what to expect, but that's

no problem: as a reader you are used to finding your bearings at the

start of a new topic. That's why the first sentence of each paragraph in

a piece of writing is most often a topic sentence that clearly announces

the next point the writer plans to take up.

But the moment you learn what the new subject will be, your attitude

changes. You expect the writer's sentences to twine around this acknowledged topic until a new subject is announced and a new cluster

of sentences begins, often but not always after a paragraph break. Most

writing moves from one sentence cluster to the next, each cluster unfolding a little more of what the author has to say.

How is this intertwining of related sentences achieved? Much of the

effect depends on grammatical and formal connections between sentences. Notice how forcemeat, the new topic proclaimed in the passage above, becomes the grammatical subject of the second sentence.

It, the subject of the third sentence, refers to forcemeat too, so the second and third sentences of the passage grammatically center on the

announced topic of the first. True, sentence four introduces a new

grammatical subject—wrapping—but wrappings were mentioned back

in the opening statement also, so listing the forcemeat artist's wrapping options here seems wholly appropriate. Terrines, pates, and gallatines are made up of some sort of forcemeat wrapped in something

else, and the subjects of each sentence in the passage keep you unescapably focused on this central fact: in order, they include (1) "terrines, pates, and galantines," (2) "Forcemeat," (3) "It" [forcemeat],

and (4) "wrapping." As Wise's sentences show, a classic way to make

writing hold together is to make the subject of each new sentence

something already announced in a previous one. It's hard to believe a

simple trick like this can do so much to improve the coherence of your

writing until you try it.

Maybe you're unconvinced. See how this revision of the forcemeat

passage strikes you:

No matter how unpretentious and simple or how fancifully adorned, terrines, pates, and galantines are basically composed of a forcemeat cooked

in some sort of wrapping. The French finely or coarsely chop, grind, or

puree meat, poultry, or fish— seasoning and binding it with egg, cream,

bread, or a combination of the three into a mixture they call farce. Strips

or pieces of meat, livers, sweetbreads, fat, vegetables, or truffle may be

layered with the forcemeat to vary color, texture, and taste. Caul fat, fatback, bacon strips, salt pork, pastry crust, fish fillets, grape leaves, or, as

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sometimes in the case of galantines, the skin of the animal may form the wrapping.

Although this passage says almost exactly what the first version did, chances are you found it harder to follow. What are “the French” doing in the subject slot of sentence two? Is sentence three really about “Strips or pieces of meat”? The ideas in the passage are just as closely related as ever, but the revised version doesn’t encourage you see that. The way it jumps from previously unannounced subject to previously unannounced subject leaves you to uncover the connections for yourself.

Multiply this impression over a whole series of sentence clusters and you have a common but fairly subtle problem. A great deal of writing that appears disjointed and pointless, whether it really is or not, seems that way because the writer chose the wrong grammatical subjects.

Chapter 10 explains in detail how sentences can be combined and reconfigured to make their grammatical subjects whatever you choose.

For maximum coherence, it’s usually best to choose pre-announced ones.

----- Exercise 1 -----

Rewrite the following passages so that each sentence has a word or concept mentioned in the opening sentence for its subject. Pronoun subjects

that refer to a word in the first sentence are okay. If you need help with the rewriting, read ahead in Chapter 10. How do your revisions affect the coherence of each passage?

1. Logical positivists formed a school of modern philosophy led by the Vienna Circle of the 1920’s. Mathematical precision was their model for philosophical thinking. Moral and value statements they considered nonsensical. Analysis of language rather

than things provided their mode of operation.

2. Antarctica is home to a strange body of fresh water.

Researchers there have found an unfrozen cache of fresh water

the size of Lake Ontario. The Russian base Vostok is directly over the lake, which is trapped under 2 1 miles of ice. Measurements show the lake is 124 miles long and averages 400 feet deep. Scientists believe it may harbor ancient life forms but are reluctant to try to tap the water. Contamination is one problem they fear. The tremendous pressure caused by the lake's icy overburden is another.

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3. Routers may be the most versatile woodworking tools of all. Using a straightedge and a router, woodworkers can cut stock with great precision. Mortises, tenons, and all components of other joints can be cut with routers. Edge planes are no longer needed once you have a router to shape pieces of wood. And, of course, cutting moldings is the router's special province.

----- Exercise 2 -----

Rewrite the following passages so that each sentence has a new word or concept for its subject (boldface). One way to do this is to select a new subject from the words and ideas in the second part of the sentence.

For instance, "Bald eagles build king-size nests along the shores of Western lakes" could become "Western lakes are ringed with the kingsize nests of bald eagles." How do your revisions affect the coherence of each passage?

1. Roman artists often used "clarifying perspective" in inventive ways. A muralist from Pompeii painted a riot in an amphitheater to show events taking place inside and outside the arena at the same time. Another painter showed the beginning and end of the fall of Icarus at the top and bottom of the same picture. The artist of the famous Nile Mosaic presented the whole course of the river from the Sudan to the delta in four contiguous panels, one above the other within the same frame.

2. Saint Laurence has long been the most popular of the Roman martyrs. According to traditional stories, when he was commanded by the prefect Valerian to hand over church treasures to the state by a certain day, he sold the treasures instead and gave the money to poor Christians. Called to account for this, Laurence presented the poor people he had helped to Valerian. "These," he proclaimed, "are the treasures of the church!"

3. People who scraped a living in forests and on untilled common lands long nourished democratic sentiments in England. Forest outlaws became egalitarian heroes in the Robin Hood stories, and poor tradespeople and outcasts with no place in towns or on established estates provided support for various movements of social unrest. These groups made up a significant population. According to the seventeenth century commentator Richard Baxter, "the woods and commons are planted with nailers,

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scythe-smiths and other iron labourers, like a continued village."

Based on Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*

PATTERNS OF OLD AND NEW INFORMATION

As Chapter 7 explains, a key feature of the English stress system is that the chief stress in a sentence, or sentence nucleus, typically falls on the last significant word.

Palmetto hearts are not only edible but delicious.

Swimming snakes undulate from side to SIDE.

Our word farce comes from the French term for FORCEmeat.

This trait arises from the fairly strict word order observed in English sentences, where in the great majority of cases the subject comes first and is followed by a predicate or comment about the subject. Palmetto hearts [subject] are edible and delicious [predicate]. Swimming snakes

[subject] undulate from side to side [predicate]. Farce [subject] means forcemeat [predicate].

The reason predicates typically get more emphasis than subjects in English sentences is that in normal coherent discourse most subjects look back to already established information, while the predicates that follow them present some new thought or detail. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, subjects hold passages together by referring to things already known. Predicates keep the thought rolling forward by introducing new ideas. Here a series of subjects maintains unwavering focus on a topic announced in the first sentence:

As a class, farmers are one of the despised minorities. So far as I can see, farming is considered marginal or incidental to the economy of the country, and farmers, when they are thought of at all, are thought of as hicks and yokels, whose lives do not fit into the modern scene. The average American farmer is now an old man whose sons have moved to the cities. His knowledge, and his intimate connection with the land, are about to be lost. The small independent farmer is going the way of the small independent craftsmen and storekeepers. He is being forced off the land into the cities, his place taken over by absentee owners, corporations, and machines.

Wendell. Berry. A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural
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With the exception of one throw-away reference to the author, all the subjects here name farming or farmers or their attributes. Meanwhile, the predicates pile on new details in support of the central idea, that farmers have dwindled into an imperiled minority. Each sentence anchors itself through its subject in the previously known—the passage is about farming and farmers—before launching into the accumulating evidence that gives the argument its persuasive force.

Although most writing is less intensely focused than Berry's passage,

alternation between familiar topics as the subjects of your sentences and

new material in the predicates is still the most important secret of making your writing coherent. For instance, in this apparently relaxed discussion of oranges John McPhee allows himself much greater latitude

than Berry in choosing grammatical subjects, but with one telling exception he still makes sure each subject refers to something already established or “known” from earlier statements:

The Valencia has emerged in this century as something close to a universal orange. It is more widely and extensively planted than any other. From

Florida and California and Central and South America to South Africa and Australia, Valencias grow in abundance in nearly all the orange centers of the world except Valencia. Having given the world the most remunerative orange yet known, Spain now specializes in its celebrated strains of bloods and navels. Only two percent of the Spanish crop are Valencias, and perhaps only half of that comes from the groves of Valencia itself; much of the remainder grows in old, untended groves near Seville, where cattle wander through and munch oranges on the trees, on either bank of the Guadalquivir.

John McPhee, *Oranges*

McPhee’s first three grammatical subjects—Valencia, it, Valencias—name the same thing, the variety of oranges he is writing about. Spain, the fourth subject, ventures a little farther afield, but not much. Valencia is located in Spain, after all, and this fact plus the way the word chimes with McPhee’s earlier geographical references—Florida, California,

Central and South America, and so on—qualifies it as a “known” concept, the sort of thing you’ve been led to expect this passage will discuss. The same can be said for “two percent,” “half,” and “much,” the next group of subjects. The beginning of the passage established that

McPhee is interested in the number of Valencia oranges grown throughout the world, so his focus on quantities here comes as no surprise.

COHERENCE 101

At first glance cattle, the subject of McPhee’s final clause, seems a major exception. Maybe at second glance too. McPhee runs some risk

injecting this subject at the end of his passage, but it is tucked away in

a subordinate clause modifying “orange groves,” surely a “known” concept by this point, and the image neatly rounds off a key idea: Valencia

oranges are big business everywhere except in Valencia. McPhee finds

this surprising and uses the cattle image, which comes as a surprise to

us, to drive his point home. Think how much flatter the end of the passage would sound if he’d structured his final sentence for maximum coherence:

Only two percent of the Spanish crop are Valencias, and perhaps only

half of that comes from the groves of Valencia itself; much of the remainder grows in old, untended groves near Seville, where oranges are used as

cattle fodder along either bank of the Guadalquivir.

Still, writing in a formal situation where objective, businesslike communication is the order of the day, you’d be wise not only to drop cattle as a subject but to edit out other details that lend color to McPhee’s

oranges:

Only two percent of the Spanish crop are Valencias, and perhaps only

half of that comes from the groves of Valencia itself; much of the remainder grows near Seville, where oranges are used as cattle fod