

# Sentence Clarity



Student writers often come to a writing conference and ask their consultants to make sure their writing flows. Often, this flowing quality comes from *sentence clarity*—the way we put together a sentence and give information in a logical order so that readers understand it easily. Here are a few ways to help your writing flow.

## Ordering Sentences within a Paragraph (also see “Transitions”)

- **Go from old to new information**

Introduce readers to the main idea of a paragraph first. When you give new information, link it to familiar information in earlier sentences. Move from old information to new information. For example:

The cast of *Firefly*, a space western TV series, returned in the film *Serenity*. In this film, **(old)** a fanatical assassin hunts one of the crew of the ship *Serenity*: River Tam, a seventeen year old psychic **(new)**. River has intuited **(old)** one of the government’s oldest secrets: an experiment that cost the lives of an entire planet **(new)**.

Below is a sentence that is not clear because it moves from new information to old:

Lately, most movies I’ve seen have been merely second-rate entertainment, but occasionally, some have worthwhile themes. The rapid disappearance of the Indian culture **(new)** is the topic of a recent movie **(old)** I saw.

In this example, the writer has skipped abruptly from movies to vanishing Indian culture. To make the transition more clear, reverse the information in the last sentence: *A recent movie I saw talked about the rapid disappearance of the Indian culture.*

## Sentence Construction

- **Add dependent clauses at the beginning or end of a sentence rather than in the middle.**

Breaking up the main sentence makes it harder to follow.

The following sentence is not as clear because the dependent clause is embedded in the middle:

Industrial spying, *because we use computers to store information*, is increasing rapidly.

The dependent clause tells a reader *how* or *why*. In this example “because we use computers to store information” tells us *why* industrial spying is increasing. The following sentences are much more clear:

Industrial spying is increasing rapidly *because we use computers to store information*.

OR

*Because we use computers to store information*, industrial spying is increasing rapidly.

## Sentence Construction (continued)

- **Use the active voice**

Active voice means the subject of the sentence does the action: *I shot the sheriff.*

Passive voice means the subject was acted on: *The sheriff was shot by me.*

The active voice tells us who did what more clearly than the passive, in fewer words. The passive voice is often awkward and can be unclear: *The sheriff was shot.* By whom?

- **Use parallel constructions**

We can read a list more easily if all the pieces of it have the same form. Use the same kind of verb (chopped, minced, grated . . . or: flying, swimming, riding) or use phrases with the same structure.

In this sentence, each item in the list is in the same infinitive verb tense: “to become”, “to take” and “to seek”. Thus, the sentence can be called “parallel.”

In the hurricane, we learned (1) to become aware of the warning signs, (2) to take precautions, and (3) to seek shelter early.

Here, the sentence is not parallel because the verb tenses are different. In this example, we have “to become” (infinitive), “taking” (gerund), and “should seek” (subjunctive).

In the hurricane, we learned (1) to become aware of the warning signs, (2) taking precautions is important, and (3) we should seek shelter early.

- **Link pronouns to nouns clearly**

Because pronouns stand in for nouns, be sure your pronouns refer to nouns you have already put in place. Vague pronoun reference often occurs when pronouns are used at the start of a sentence. See “Vague Pronouns.”

Here are some unclear examples:

Time is money. *This* is valuable.

What is valuable here – time, money, or the worn out idea?

Alicia met Sarah in Cairo. She wore a green silk dress.

Which woman wore the dress?