

Structuring Sentences – Improving Clarity

Here you can learn

- **how to make sentences clearer for your reader.**

This information sheet is linked to Information Sheet 9: Structuring Sentences – The Basics. An associated worksheet is also available.

General Information

A paper should be written with the reader in mind; a recommendation that is true not only for the content of the paper but also for how you structure paragraphs (see Information Sheet 10: Structuring Paragraphs) and sentences. Books on clear, reader-friendly, English academic writing contain five guidelines for improving sentences.

1. Write what you want to emphasize at the end of the sentence

Readers tend to remember what is at the end of any text unit, e.g., at the end of papers, sections, paragraphs, and sentences. The new, most important point of a sentence should therefore be at the end.

e.g., Instead of writing *Our research contributes substantially to the topic despite being based on a small field trial,*

write *Despite being based on a small field trial, our research contributes substantially to the topic.*

2. Write old information before new information

This guideline is related to the previous one since you probably want to emphasize the new information in the sentence. Old information can be any fact, phrase, or word you have introduced before or is well-known. The new information is what you want to say about that fact, phrase, or word

e.g., Instead of writing *The participants were recruited online. An app could be used by the participants when responding,*

write *The participants were recruited online. They could respond using an app.*

3. Write simple information before complex information

First impressions are important anywhere. The first sentence in a paper, section, or paragraph should be relatively easy to understand, and the first half of your sentences should, where possible, be easy to process.

e.g., Instead of writing *The pioneering work of Mcaughton and Tarrants (1985) demonstrating the inducibility of Si in response to herbivory was the beginning of a re-focus in Si research,*

write *Si research began to re-focus with the pioneering work of McNaughton and Tarrants (1985), which demonstrated the inducibility of Si defences.*

4. Write subject, verb, and object close together

A sentence in an English text is generally easier to process if subject, main verb, and object are close together.

e.g., Instead of writing *The research, based on field data, investigates, using a new algorithm, the accuracy of Smith's model,*

write *The research combines field data with a new algorithm to investigate the accuracy of Smith's model.*

5. Write dependent clauses close to what they refer to

For more information on clauses, see [Information Sheet 9](#).

Dependent clauses need to be placed close to what they refer to. Without any other clues, readers will attach them to what is nearby.

e.g., In the sentence *Two suicide bombings killed 44 people at Coptic churches in Egypt on Palm Sunday, which the Islamic State claimed responsibility for,* the readers would be entitled to think that the Islamic State is claiming responsibility for Palm Sunday. It would have been clearer to write *The Islamic State has claimed responsibility for two suicide bombings that killed 44 people at Coptic churches in Egypt on Palm Sunday.*

Useful Resources

Gopen, G. 2004. *Expectations: Teaching Writing from the Reader's Perspective*. London, Longman.

Williams, J. & Bizup, J. 2014. *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*. New Jersey, Pearson.

Final Comments/Tips

- These guidelines can be mutually exclusive. If they are, you decide which guideline(s) you intend to follow for each sentence – it is best to base that decision on what is easiest for your reader.