

Unit Two Sentence Focus

When we write a sentence, with each word we write down we limit our options as to what we can write next. The beginning of each sentence dictates what the rest of the sentence will look like, how it will read, and whether it will be direct or wordy and fumbling. So it makes sense then that the first word (or at least the first noun, the grammatical subject), is the most important word in the sentence. That is after all what the sentence is about. We need to consciously decide what we want our sentences to focus on so that the reader can pick up on what we think is important. If we decide wisely, we write with a strong voice and develop active, alive sentences. Generally we write about people because in our world view everything revolves around people and our concerns. Therefore, people are generally the best subjects for our sentences. People *do* things and therefore can elicit active verbs.

Well chosen subjects do not insure good writing, but poorly chosen subjects do ensure poor writing.

There are 2 principles of good subject choice:

1. **The first** is to make, when possible, the subject one wants to focus on the grammatical subject of the sentence one is writing.
2. **The second** is, again when possible, to prefer personal and/or concrete, specific subjects to vague, abstract, general ones.

There are three sentence-beginning errors that inexperienced writers make:

1. The most common mistake is to use highly abstract subjects when there is no need to do so, when other alternatives are available. (The academic thing to do.) One of the characteristics of academic discourse is the use of abstract subjects. Trouble is these subjects usually produce the verb **be** in the verb position and abstractions don't **do** things negating the option to make the sentence active which is preferable. Abstractions don't do things, don't act.
2. Second, which is actually a form of the first one is to begin a high percentage of sentences with a personal possessive followed by an abstract word. Normally the possessive represents the best subject rather than the abstract word:

My reason for doing this was . . .
I did this because . . .

His improvement was enormous.
He improved enormously.

Their actions were taken because . . .
They acted because . . .

3. The third, less common, mistake is to begin a sentence with the expletives there or it when they are inappropriate.

There were two actions that could have been taken.
We could have taken two actions.

It will be required that an essay test will be taken.
Each student will have to take an essay test.

The major responsibility for bad student writing lies in the English Department, for there is very little concentration on grammar and word usage, but great emphasis is put on reading plays, novels, and poems.

Defintition of passive voice:

Two things are true of any sentence in the pasive: the subject of the sentence is acted upon rather than acting, and the subject of the sentence and the agent of the verb are two different words.

The cat can be put out by anyone in the house.

Cat is the subject but anyone is the agent; anyone refers to the person performing the action of the verb, and the cat is what is being acted upon. A sentence in the active voice has a subject that is also the agent of the verb, a subject that is doing the acting:

Anyone in the house can put out the cat.

This is the passive pattern:

subject + be + past participle + (by + agent)

That is, the passive consists of a subject + a finite form of the verb be + the past participle of a transitive verb + (optional) the word by + the agent of the verb. The by and the agent may always be omitted.

Passive can be used appropriately in the following three circumstances:

1. When one wishes to focus on the word that would be the direct object if the sentence were written in the active voice:

Stephen Crane wrote The Red Badge of Courage.
(active voice; focuses on the author)

The Red Badge of Courage was written by Stephen Crane.
(passive voice; focuses on the novel)

2. When the agent of the action is, in the context, “universal”:

The passive is best employed in three circumstances.
(by whom? by anyone)

3. When the agent is unimportant or unknown or when trying to express it would involve one in pointless complications:

His trial was held on Monday and he was convicted.
(nothing would, normally, be gained by trying to put this sentence into the active with the concomitant need to find agents for the two verbs)

(Ask what column of words is easiest to visualize? To set up distinction between concrete and abstract. Concrete = words we can respond to with at least 1 of our 5 senses)

— A —
(abstract)

example

characteristic

problem

reason

differences

— B —

(not as abstract as column A—require less context for meaning)

conversations

communication

democracy

trend

school

— C —
(concrete)

men

students

horse

Coca-cola

SENTENCE FOCUS

EXAMPLES:

1.	Weak:	The reason we studied male and female communication is because we wanted to find out why men and women have communication problems.
	Better:	We studied male and female communication because we wanted to find out why men and women have communication problems.
	Or:	We studied male and female communication to find out why men and women have communication problems.
2.	Weak:	Topics like sports generally are avoided by women.
	Better:	Women generally avoid topics like sports.
3.	Weak:	The differences between male and female communication are that generally men get straight to the point and women go into detail.
	Better:	Generally, men get straight to the point while women go into detail.

The Illustrious Professor Seed

At times we read something that doesn't make sense to us, or we write something ourselves, thinking "That's not what I meant to say" or "This doesn't sound right." Chances are that the writing isn't clearly focused on the subject or topic. Your readers will more easily understand your ideas if you focus them clearly, and it's really not so hard to do. Often clear focus in writing depends on clearly-focused sentence subjects.

Read the following paragraph aloud:

Professor Seed suffered through a disastrous first day as a college professor. (a) The way in which he set his alarm clock was wrong, (b) so the early bus was missed and campus wasn't reached until 30 minutes after his first class began. (c) Then the classroom couldn't be found. (d) Help was given by many students, (e) but still the wrong classroom was appeared at by him. (f) Finally the realization came that his wallet was lost, (g) so bus fare had to be borrowed. (h) At home that night, his wife was told the reason he had a bad day was because the wrong foot was started off on.

GENERALLY SPEAKING, GOOD WRITERS:

Make use of personal or concrete subjects whenever possible.

Weak: The reason I am teaching is because I couldn't think of any other way to stay in school forever.

Better: I am teaching because I couldn't think of any other way to stay in school forever.

Make the subjects they are writing about the subject of their sentences.

Weak: My reason for choosing this option was that it would help me with my goal.

Better: I chose this option because it would help me with my goal.

Avoid using "it" and "there" as subjects whenever possible.

Weak: There were problems that developed that we did not expect.

Better: Problems developed that we did not expect.

Avoid passive verbs.

Weak: Theoretical approaches to decrease the deficit were developed by Clinton's economic advisors.

Better: Clinton's economic advisors developed theoretical approaches to decrease the deficit.

Avoid using forms of the verb "to be."

Weak: His sensitivity is lost to problems such as injustice and despair.

Better: He lost his sensitivity to problems such as injustice and despair.

To determine good sentence focus, ask yourself:

"Who does what to whom?"

Which is more focused and answers the "who does what to whom?" question more clearly?

There are people who liked the movie but hated the book.

The movie was liked by some people but the book was hated by them.

Some people liked the movie but hated the book.

SUBJECTS Consider the following words as possible subjects for sentences. Are they abstract or concrete?

Politics	Society	Boxing Fans	English 429 students
Intelligence	Books	Communication	Opponents of Prop. 227

Examples:

Weak: The incidence of moonlighting in academia is high.

Better: Many teachers moonlight.

Weak: The use of Valium is greater than that of any other prescription drug in the U.S.

Better: Valium is the most widely used drug in the U.S.

Exercise One Hard Ball

Each of the following sentences begins well, but the parts in parentheses aren't focused clearly. In the blanks provided, rewrite the parts in parentheses so that you keep the focus on the personal, human subject.

EXAMPLE: The employees of Do Nuttin' Bakery often play co-ed softball games, and _____.
(usually a good time is had by everyone)_

SOLUTION: The employees of Do Nuttin' Bakery often play co-ed softball games, and usually everyone has a good time.

1. But two teams gathered at Rough Diamond Park on a Sunday afternoon, and _____
(trouble was _____)
_____ gotten into by everyone)

2. The pitcher, Mary, hit the batter, Tina, with a wild pitch, and _____

(the ball was thrown back at _____)
Mary by Tina)

3. Tina's teammates charged from the dugout, and _____
(home plate was surrounded by Mary's _____)
_____ teammates)

4. Tina's team claimed that Mary hit Tina on purpose, but _____
(it was argued by Mary's team that a _____)
_____ new pitch was just being tried out by Mary)

5. Finally, Mary demonstrated her new pitch, so _____

(it could be seen by everyone why control of the

ball was lost by Mary)

6. Mary pitched an impressive curve ball, but _____
(the ball wasn't pitched

over home plate by her)

Exercise Two Exam Stress

Sigmund, a college student, is taking an exam in his psychology class, and one of his short-essay questions reads:

What are some of the causes of problems between parents and teenagers?

Immediately Sigmund writes down some points he wants to include in his answer:

1. Rules and expectations aren't made clear.
2. Resentment occurs when chores aren't done.
3. Blame is placed on teenagers for anything that goes wrong in the home.
4. The way in which parents discipline is by yelling too much.
5. The complaint is that teenagers aren't listened to.
6. There isn't the recognition that parents are human beings too.
7. Enough respect isn't shown to parents.

Then Sigmund begins to write his answer:

"The causes of problems between parents and teenagers are. . ."

but he gets stuck before he even begins to show what he knows. Why? He has begun by focusing his first sentence on the subject *causes*, an abstract word, and the verb *are*. It looks like he is going to name all of the causes of problems in one sentence.

Now go back and improve the focus of six of the seven sentences in Sigmund's notes. Ask yourself *who does what?* in each sentence, and make your answer the sentence subject. Write your clearly focused sentences in the spaces provided. Sigmund's original sentences appear in parentheses below the spaces.

EXAMPLE 1:

(Rules and expectations aren't made clear.)

SOLUTION: Parents don't make their rules and expectations clear.

2. _____
(Resentment occurs when chores aren't done.)
3. _____
(Blame is placed on teenagers for anything that goes wrong in the home.)
4. _____
(The way in which parents discipline is by yelling too much.)
5. _____
(The complaint is that teenagers aren't listened to.)
6. _____
(There isn't the recognition that parents are human beings too.)
7. _____
(Enough respect isn't shown to parents.)

Now write three well-focused sentences in which you state what you think are the causes of conflict between teenagers and parents:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Improve the focus in the following sentences. Try to make the sentence subject a personal subject.
(Ask yourself, “Who does what?”)

1. The reason males and females have communication problems is because they have different styles.
2. Communication differs in males and females.
3. Conversations between men and conversations between women are about different topics.
4. Metamessages are paid more attention to by women while messages are paid more attention to by males.

Improve the focus in the following sentences. Try to make the sentence subject a personal subject.
(Ask yourself, “Who does what?”)

5. One difference in the ways males and females talk is style.
6. The style of when females and males communicate is different.
7. The similarities are that men and women both talk about relationships, but this topic is talked about more among women.
8. Conversations between women usually talk about family, relationships, other women and themselves.
9. Listening is done differently by men and women.
10. There are problems when males and females don’t understand each other.

EXERCISE: Rewrite each of the following sentences so that they are clearer and better focused.

11. Fear of brutality from customers is a concern many prostitutes have.
12. There were more than four dozen cats living in the two room flat.

13. The result he hoped to achieve was frightening the girls.
14. It is hoped that in the future you will continue to do business with our company.
15. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* by Sigmund Freud, it is stated that there are certain disadvantages created by civilization.
16. Another period of time when I usually had to make calls is around six to seven in the morning.

VERBS

You can add specificity and detail to your sentences by concentrating their action in substantial, well-chosen verbs, avoiding whenever possible weak verbs such as *is*, *was*, *had*, and *does*. Beginning writers often use a weak roundabout verb or the passive voice because they're trying to sound academic. But when a writer allows the verb to carry the action of the sentence, the sentence is not only more forceful but more to the point, with fewer unnecessary words and phrases.

Examples:

Weak: Forbin's intention was to become the world's greatest pool player.

Better: Forbin intended to become the world's greatest pool player.

Weak: His editorial contained the implication that we should unite as consumers to protest various advertising gimmicks.

Better: In his editorial, he implied that we should unite as consumers to protest various advertising gimmicks.

Weak: My observation was done in a night class on expository writing.

Better: I observed a night class on expository writing.

EXERCISE: Rewrite each of the following sentences so that they are clearer and better focused.

1. His improvement was enormous.
2. The dog was put out and the cat was let in by Jon.
3. Subsistence of wolves is based on a diet of mice.

4. Forbin was a person who simply could not hold a cue stick steadily.
5. The car is being parked by Farzad.
6. The competition between Harley and Rose was furious.
7. The reason for the confusion of most people with the new regulations is the ambiguous way they were written.

EXERCISE: Rewrite each of the following sentences so that they are clearer and better focused.

8. There were several poodles paddling in the lake.
9. The idea that he would lie is shocking to me.
10. It is easy for victims to feel the devastating effects of earthquakes.
11. One reason I drove to school is because I woke up so late.
12. Insecurity about the relationship is a problem many couples face.

EXERCISE: Rewrite each of the following sentences so that they are clearer and better focused.

13. Historians' views are harsh toward Nazi Germany.
14. The truck was loaded by the workers.
15. I am always amazed by my sister's intelligence.
16. The indication was that he wanted to leave home.