

II

Elementary Principles of Composition

12. Choose a suitable design and hold to it.

A basic structural design underlies every kind of writing. Writers will in part follow this design, in part deviate from it, according to their skills, their needs, and the unexpected events that accompany the act of composition. Writing, to be effective, must follow closely the thoughts of the writer, but not necessarily in the order in which those thoughts occur. This calls for a scheme of procedure. In some cases, the best design is no design, as with a love letter, which is simply an outpouring, or with a casual essay, which is a ramble. But in most cases, planning must be a deliberate prelude to writing. The first principle of composition, therefore, is to foresee or determine the shape of what is to come and pursue that shape.

A sonnet is built on a fourteen-line frame, each line containing five feet. Hence, sonneteers know exactly where they are headed, although they may not know how to get there. Most forms of composition are less clearly defined, more flexible, but all have skeletons to which the writer will bring the flesh and the blood. The more clearly the writer perceives the shape, the better are the chances of success.

13. *Make the paragraph the unit of composition.*

The paragraph is a convenient unit; it serves all forms of literary work. As long as it holds together, a paragraph may be of any length—a single, short sentence or a passage of great duration.

If the subject on which you are writing is of slight extent, or if you intend to treat it briefly, there may be no need to divide it into topics. Thus, a brief description, a brief book review, a brief account of a single incident, a narrative merely outlining an action, the setting forth of a single idea—any one of these is best written in a single paragraph. After the paragraph has been written, examine it to see whether division will improve it.

Ordinarily, however, a subject requires division into topics, each of which should be dealt with in a paragraph. The object of treating each topic in a paragraph by itself is, of course, to aid the reader. The beginning of each paragraph is a signal that a new step in the development of the subject has been reached.

As a rule, single sentences should not be written or printed as paragraphs. An exception may be made of sentences of transition, indicating the relation between the parts of an exposition or argument.

In dialogue, each speech, even if only a single word, is usually a paragraph by itself; that is, a new paragraph begins with each change of speaker. The application of this rule when dialogue and narrative are combined is best learned from examples in well-edited works of fiction. Sometimes a writer, seeking to create an effect of rapid talk or for some other reason, will elect not to set off each speech in a separate paragraph and instead will run speeches together. The common practice, however, and the one that serves best in most instances, is to give each speech a paragraph of its own.

As a rule, begin each paragraph either with a sentence that suggests the topic or with a sentence that helps the transition. If a paragraph forms part of a larger composition, its relation to what precedes, or its function as a part of the whole, may need to be expressed. This can sometimes be done by a mere word or phrase (*again, therefore, for the same reason*) in the first sentence. Sometimes, however, it is expedient to get into the topic slowly, by way of a sentence or two of introduction or transition.

In narration and description, the paragraph sometimes begins with a concise, comprehensive statement serving to hold together the details that follow.

The breeze served us admirably.

The campaign opened with a series of reverses.

The next ten or twelve pages were filled with a curious set of entries.

But when this device, or any device, is too often used, it becomes a mannerism. More commonly, the opening sentence simply indicates by its subject the direction the paragraph is to take.

At length I thought I might return toward the stockade.

He picked up the heavy lamp from the table and began to explore.

Another flight of steps, and they emerged on the roof.

In animated narrative, the paragraphs are likely to be short and without any semblance of a topic sentence, the writer rushing headlong, event following event in rapid succession. The break between such paragraphs merely serves the purpose of a rhetorical pause, throwing into prominence some detail of the action.

In general, remember that paragraphing calls for a good eye as well as a logical mind. Enormous blocks of print look formidable to readers, who are often reluctant to tackle them. Therefore, breaking long paragraphs in two, even if it is not necessary to do so for sense, meaning, or logical development, is often a visual help. But remember, too, that firing off many short paragraphs in quick succession can be distracting. Paragraph breaks used only for show read like the writing of commerce or of display advertising. Moderation and a sense of order should be the main considerations in paragraphing.

14. Use the active voice.

The active voice is usually more direct and vigorous than the passive:

I shall always remember my first visit to Boston.

This is much better than

My first visit to Boston will always be remembered by me.

The latter sentence is less direct, less bold, and less concise. If the writer tries to make it more concise by omitting "by me,"

My first visit to Boston will always be remembered,

it becomes indefinite: is it the writer or some undisclosed person or the world at large that will always remember this visit?

This rule does not, of course, mean that the writer should entirely discard the passive voice, which is frequently convenient and sometimes necessary.

The dramatists of the Restoration are little esteemed today.

Modern readers have little esteem for the dramatists of the Restoration.

The first would be the preferred form in a paragraph on the dramatists of the Restoration, the second in a paragraph on the tastes of modern readers. The need to make a particular word the subject of the sentence will often, as in these examples, determine which voice is to be used.

The habitual use of the active voice, however, makes for forcible writing. This is true not only in narrative concerned principally with action but in writing of any kind. Many a tame sentence of description or exposition can be made lively and emphatic by substituting a transitive in the active voice for some such perfunctory expression as *there is* or *could be heard*.

There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground.	Dead leaves covered the ground.
At dawn the crowing of a rooster could be heard.	The cock's crow came with dawn.
The reason he left college was that his health became impaired.	Failing health compelled him to leave college.
It was not long before she was very sorry that she had said what she had.	She soon repented her words.

Note, in the examples above, that when a sentence is made stronger, it usually becomes shorter. Thus, brevity is a by-product of vigor.

15. Put statements in positive form.

Make definite assertions. Avoid tame, colorless, hesitating, noncommittal language. Use the word *not* as a means of denial or in antithesis, never as a means of evasion.

He was not very often on time.	He usually came late.
She did not think that studying Latin was a sensible	She thought the study of Latin a waste of time.

way to use one's time.	
<i>The Taming of the Shrew</i> is rather weak in spots. Shakespeare does not portray Katharine as a very admirable character, nor does Bianca remain long in memory as an important character in Shakespeare's works.	The women in <i>The Taming of the Shrew</i> are unattractive. Katharine is disagreeable, Bianca insignificant.

The last example, before correction, is indefinite as well as negative. The corrected version, consequently, is simply a guess at the writer's intention.

All three examples show the weakness inherent in the word *not*. Consciously or unconsciously, the reader is dissatisfied with being told only what is not; the reader wishes to be told what is. Hence, as a rule, it is better to express even a negative in positive form.

not honest	dishonest
not important	trifling
did not remember	forgot
did not pay any attention to	ignored
did not have much confidence in	distrusted

Placing negative and positive in opposition makes for a stronger structure.

Not charity, but simple justice.

Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more.

Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.

Negative words other than *not* are usually strong.

Her loveliness I never knew / Until she smiled on me.

Statements qualified with unnecessary auxiliaries or conditionals sound irresolute.

If you would let us know	If you will let us know the
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the time of your arrival, we would be happy to arrange your transportation from the airport.	time of your arrival, we shall be happy to arrange your transportation from the airport.
Applicants can make a good impression by being neat and punctual.	Applicants will make a good impression if they are neat and punctual.
Plath may be ranked among those modern poets who died young.	Plath was one of those modern poets who died young.

If your every sentence admits a doubt, your writing will lack authority. Save the auxiliaries *would*, *should*, *could*, *may*, *might*, and *can* for situations involving real uncertainty.

16. Use definite, specific, concrete language.

Prefer the specific to the general, the definite to the vague, the concrete to the abstract.

A period of unfavorable weather set in.	It rained every day for a week.
He showed satisfaction as he took possession of his well-earned reward.	He grinned as he pocketed the coin.

If those who have studied the art of writing are in accord on any one point, it is this: the surest way to arouse and hold the reader's attention is by being specific, definite, and concrete. The greatest writers—Homer, Dante, Shakespeare—are effective largely because they deal in particulars and report the details that matter. Their words call up pictures.

Jean Stafford, to cite a more modern author, demonstrates in her short story "In the Zoo" how prose is made vivid by the use of words that evoke images and sensations:

...Daisy and I in time found asylum in a small menagerie down by the railroad tracks. It belonged to a gentle alcoholic ne'er-do-well, who did nothing all day long but drink bathtub gin in rickys and play solitaire and smile to himself and talk to his animals. He had a little, stunted red vixen and a deodorized skunk, a parrot from Tahiti that spoke Parisian French, a woebegone coyote, and two capuchin monkeys, so serious and humanized, so small and sad and sweet, and so religious-looking with their tonsured heads that it was impossible not to think their gibberish was really an ordered language with a grammar that someday some philologist would understand.

Gran knew about our visits to Mr. Murphy and she did not object, for it gave her keen pleasure to excoriate him when we came home. His vice was not a matter of guesswork; it was an established fact that he was half-seas over from dawn till midnight. "With the black Irish," said Gran, "the taste for drink is taken in with the mother's milk and is never mastered. Oh, I know all about those promises to join the temperance movement and not to touch another drop. The way to Hell is paved with good intentions."*

If the experiences of Walter Mitty, of Molly Bloom, of Rabbit Angstrom have seemed for the moment real to countless readers, if in reading Faulkner we have almost the sense of inhabiting Yoknapatawpha County during the decline of the South, it is because the details used are definite, the terms concrete. It is not that every detail is given—that would be impossible, as well as to no purpose—but that all the significant details are given, and with such accuracy and vigor that readers, in imagination, can project themselves into the scene.

In exposition and in argument, the writer must likewise never lose hold of the concrete; and even when dealing with general principles, the writer must furnish particular instances of their application.

In his *Philosophy of Style*, Herbert Spencer gives two sentences to illustrate how the vague and general can be turned into the vivid and particular:

In proportion as the manners, customs, and amusements of a nation are cruel and barbarous, the regulations of its penal code will be severe.	In proportion as men delight in battles, bullfights, and combats of gladiators, will they punish by hanging, burning, and the rack.
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To show what happens when strong writing is deprived of its vigor, George Orwell once took a passage from the Bible and drained it of its blood. On the left, below, is Orwell's translation; on the right, the verse from Ecclesiastes (King James Version).

Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must inevitably be taken into account.	I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.
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17. Omit needless words.

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all sentences short, or avoid all detail and treat subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

Many expressions in common use violate this principle.

the question as to whether	whether (the question whether)
there is no doubt but that	no doubt (doubtless)
used for fuel purposes	used for fuel
he is a man who	he

in a hasty manner	hastily
this is a subject that	this subject
Her story is a strange one.	Her story is strange.
the reason why is that	because

The fact that is an especially debilitating expression. It should be revised out of every sentence in which it occurs.

owing to the fact that	since (because)
in spite of the fact that	though (although)
call your attention to the fact that	remind you (notify you)
I was unaware of the fact that	I was unaware that (did not know)
the fact that he had not succeeded	his failure
the fact that I had arrived	my arrival

See also the words *case, character, nature* in Chapter IV.

Who is, which was, and the like are often superfluous.

His cousin, who is a member of the same firm	His cousin, a member of the same firm
Trafalgar, which was Nelson's last battle	Trafalgar, Nelson's last battle

As the active voice is more concise than the passive, and a positive statement more concise than a negative one, many of the examples given under Rules 14 and 15 illustrate this rule as well.

A common way to fall into wordiness is to present a single complex idea, step by step, in a series of sentences that might to advantage be combined into one.

Macbeth was very ambitious. This led him to wish to become king of Scotland. The witches told him that this wish of his would come true. The king of Scotland at this time was	Encouraged by his wife, Macbeth achieved his ambition and realized the prediction of the witches by murdering Duncan and becoming king of Scotland in his place. (26
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Duncan. Encouraged by his wife, Macbeth murdered Duncan. He was thus enabled to succeed Duncan as king. (51 words)	words)
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18. Avoid a succession of loose sentences.

This rule refers especially to loose sentences of a particular type: those consisting of two clauses, the second introduced by a conjunction or relative. A writer may err by making sentences too compact and periodic. An occasional loose sentence prevents the style from becoming too formal and gives the reader a certain relief. Consequently, loose sentences are common in easy, unstudied writing. The danger is that there may be too many of them.

An unskilled writer will sometimes construct a whole paragraph of sentences of this kind, using as connectives *and*, *but*, and, less frequently, *who*, *which*, *when*, *where*, and *while*, these last in nonrestrictive senses. (See Rule 3.)

The third concert of the subscription series was given last evening, and a large audience was in attendance. Mr. Edward Appleton was the soloist, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra furnished the instrumental music. The former showed himself to be an artist of the first rank, while the latter proved itself fully deserving of its high reputation. The interest aroused by the series has been very gratifying to the Committee, and it is planned to give a similar series annually hereafter. The fourth concert will be given on Tuesday, May 10, when an equally attractive program will be presented.

Apart from its triteness and emptiness, the paragraph above is bad because of the structure of its sentences, with their mechanical symmetry and singsong. Compare these sentences from the chapter "What I Believe" in E. M. Forster's *Two Cheers for Democracy*:

I believe in aristocracy, though—if that is the right word, and if a democrat may use it. Not an aristocracy of power, based upon rank and influence, but an aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate and the plucky. Its members are to be found in all nations and classes, and all through the ages, and there is a secret understanding between them when they meet. They represent the true human tradition, the one permanent victory of our queer race over cruelty and chaos. Thousands of them perish in obscurity, a few are great names. They are sensitive for others as well as for themselves, they are considerate without being fussy, their pluck is not swankiness but the power to endure, and they can take a joke.*

A writer who has written a series of loose sentences should recast enough of them to remove the monotony, replacing them with simple sentences, sentences of two clauses joined by a semicolon, periodic sentences of two clauses, or sentences (loose or periodic) of three clauses—whichever best represent the real relations of the thought.

19. *Express coordinate ideas in similar form.*

This principle, that of parallel construction, requires that expressions similar in content and function be outwardly similar. The likeness of form enables the reader to recognize more readily the likeness of content and function. The familiar Beatitudes exemplify the virtue of parallel construction.

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

The unskilled writer often violates this principle, mistakenly believing in the value of constantly varying the form of expression. When repeating a statement to emphasize it, the writer may need to vary its form. Otherwise, the writer should follow the principle of parallel construction.

Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method, while now the laboratory method is employed.	Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method; now it is taught by the laboratory method.
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The lefthand version gives the impression that the writer is undecided or timid, apparently unable or afraid to choose one form of expression and hold to it. The righthand version shows that the writer has at least made a choice and abided by it.

By this principle, an article or a preposition applying to all the members of a series must either be used only before the first term or else be repeated before each term.

the French, the Italians, Spanish, and Portuguese	the French, the Italians, the Spanish, and the Portuguese
in spring, summer, or in winter	in spring, summer, or winter (in spring, in summer, or in winter)

Some words require a particular preposition in certain idiomatic uses. When such words are joined in a compound construction, all the appropriate prepositions must be included, unless they are the same.

His speech was marked by disagreement and scorn for his opponent's position.	His speech was marked by disagreement with and scorn for his opponent's position.
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Correlative expressions (*both, and; not, but; not only, but also; either, or; first, second, third;* and the like) should be followed by the same grammatical construction. Many violations of this rule can be corrected by rearranging the sentence.

It was both a long ceremony and very tedious.	The ceremony was both long and tedious.
A time not for words but action.	A time not for words but for action.
Either you must grant his request or incur his ill will.	You must either grant his request or incur his ill will.

My objections are, first, the injustice of the measure; second, that it is unconstitutional.	My objections are, first, that the measure is unjust; second, that it is unconstitutional.
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It may be asked, what if you need to express a rather large number of similar ideas—say, twenty? Must you write twenty consecutive sentences of the same pattern? On closer examination, you will probably find that the difficulty is imaginary—that these twenty ideas can be classified in groups, and that you need apply the principle only within each group. Otherwise, it is best to avoid the difficulty by putting statements in the form of a table.

20. Keep related words together.

The position of the words in a sentence is the principal means of showing their relationship. Confusion and ambiguity result when words are badly placed. The writer must, therefore, bring together the words and groups of words that are related in thought and keep apart those that are not so related.

He noticed a large stain in the rug that was right in the center.	He noticed a large stain right in the center of the rug.
You can call your mother in London and tell her all about George's taking you out to dinner for just two dollars.	For just two dollars you can call your mother in London and tell her all about George's taking you out to dinner.
New York's first commercial human-sperm bank opened Friday with semen samples from eighteen men frozen in a stainless steel tank.	New York's first commercial human-sperm bank opened Friday when semen samples were taken from eighteen men. The samples were then frozen and stored in a stainless steel tank.

In the lefthand version of the first example, the reader has no way of knowing whether the stain was in the center of

the rug or the rug was in the center of the room. In the lefthand version of the second example, the reader may well wonder which cost two dollars—the phone call or the dinner. In the lefthand version of the third example, the reader’s heart goes out to those eighteen poor fellows frozen in a steel tank.

The subject of a sentence and the principal verb should not, as a rule, be separated by a phrase or clause that can be transferred to the beginning.

Toni Morrison, in <i>Beloved</i> , writes about characters who have escaped from slavery but are haunted by its heritage.	In <i>Beloved</i> , Toni Morrison writes about characters who have escaped from slavery but are haunted by its heritage.
A dog, if you fail to discipline him, becomes a household pest.	Unless disciplined, a dog becomes a household pest.

Interposing a phrase or a clause, as in the lefthand examples above, interrupts the flow of the main clause. This interruption, however, is not usually bothersome when the flow is checked only by a relative clause or by an expression in apposition. Sometimes, in periodic sentences, the interruption is a deliberate device for creating suspense. (See examples under Rule 22.)

The relative pronoun should come, in most instances, immediately after its antecedent.

There was a stir in the audience that suggested disapproval.	A stir that suggested disapproval swept the audience.
He wrote three articles about his adventures in Spain, which were published in <i>Harper’s Magazine</i> .	He published three articles in <i>Harper’s Magazine</i> about his adventures in Spain.
This is a portrait of Benjamin Harrison, grandson of William Henry Harrison, who became President in 1889.	This is a portrait of Benjamin Harrison, who became President in 1889. He was the grandson of William Henry Harrison.

If the antecedent consists of a group of words, the relative comes at the end of the group, unless this would cause ambiguity.

The Superintendent of the Chicago Division, who

No ambiguity results from the above. But

A proposal to amend the Sherman Act, which has been variously judged

leaves the reader wondering whether it is the proposal or the Act that has been variously judged. The relative clause must be moved forward, to read, "A proposal, which has been variously judged, to amend the Sherman Act...."

Similarly

The grandson of William Henry Harrison, who	William Henry Harrison's grandson, Benjamin Harrison, who
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A noun in apposition may come between antecedent and relative, because in such a combination no real ambiguity can arise.

The Duke of York, his brother, who was regarded with hostility by the Whigs

Modifiers should come, if possible, next to the words they modify. If several expressions modify the same word, they should be arranged so that no wrong relation is suggested.

All the members were not present.	Not all the members were present.
She only found two mistakes.	She found only two mistakes.
The director said he hoped all members would give generously to the Fund at a meeting of the committee yesterday.	At a meeting of the committee yesterday, the director said he hoped all members would give generously to the Fund.
Major R. E. Joyce will give	On Tuesday evening at

a lecture on Tuesday evening in Bailey Hall, to which the public is invited on "My Experiences in Mesopotamia" at 8:00 P.M.	eight, Major R. E. Joyce will give a lecture in Bailey Hall on "My Experiences in Mesopotamia." The public is invited.
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Note, in the last lefthand example, how swiftly meaning departs when words are wrongly juxtaposed.

21. In summaries, keep to one tense.

In summarizing the action of a drama, use the present tense. In summarizing a poem, story, or novel, also use the present, though you may use the past if it seems more natural to do so. If the summary is in the present tense, antecedent action should be expressed by the perfect; if in the past, by the past perfect.

Chance prevents Friar John from delivering Friar Lawrence's letter to Romeo. Meanwhile, owing to her father's arbitrary change of the day set for her wedding, Juliet has been compelled to drink the potion on Tuesday night, with the result that Balthasar informs Romeo of her supposed death before Friar Lawrence learns of the nondelivery of the letter.

But whichever tense is used in the summary, a past tense in indirect discourse or in indirect question remains unchanged.

The Friar confesses that it was he who married them.

Apart from the exceptions noted, the writer should use the same tense throughout. Shifting from one tense to another gives the appearance of uncertainty and irresolution.

In presenting the statements or the thought of someone else, as in summarizing an essay or reporting a speech, do not overwork such expressions as "he said," "she stated," "the speaker added," "the speaker then went on to say," "the author also thinks." Indicate clearly at the outset, once for all, that what follows is summary, and then waste no words in repeating the notification.

In notebooks, in newspapers, in handbooks of literature, summaries of one kind or another may be indispensable, and for children in primary schools retelling a story in their own words is a useful exercise. But in the criticism or interpretation of literature, be careful to avoid dropping into summary. It may be necessary to devote one or two sentences to indicating the subject, or the opening situation, of the work being discussed, or to cite numerous details to illustrate its qualities. But you should aim at writing an orderly discussion supported by evidence, not a summary with occasional comment. Similarly, if the scope of the discussion includes a number of works, as a rule it is better not to take them up singly in chronological order but to aim from the beginning at establishing general conclusions.

22. Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end.

The proper place in the sentence for the word or group of words that the writer desires to make most prominent is usually the end.

Humanity has hardly advanced in fortitude since that time	Since that time
This steel is principally used for making razors	Because of its hardness

The word or group of words entitled to this position of prominence is usually the logical predicate—that is, the *new* element in the sentence, as it is in the second example.

The effectiveness of the periodic sentence arises from the prominence it gives to the main statement.

Four centuries ago, Christopher Columbus, one of the Italian mariners whom the decline of their own republics had put at the service of the world and of adventure, seeking for Spain a westward passage to the Indies to offset the achievement of Portuguese discoverers, lighted on America.

With these hopes and in this belief I would urge you, laying aside all hindrance, thrusting away all private aims, to devote yourself unswervingly and unflinchingly to the vigorous and successful prosecution of this war.

The other prominent position in the sentence is the beginning. Any element in the sentence other than the subject becomes emphatic when placed first.

Deceit or treachery she could never forgive.

Vast and rude, fretted by the action of nearly three thousand years, the fragments of this architecture may often seem, at first sight, like works of nature.

Home is the sailor.

A subject coming first in its sentence may be emphatic, but hardly by its position alone. In the sentence

Great kings worshiped at his shrine

the emphasis upon *kings* arises largely from its meaning and from the context. To receive special emphasis, the subject of a sentence must take the position of the predicate.

Through the middle of the valley flowed a winding stream.

The principle that the proper place for what is to be made most prominent is the end applies equally to the words of a sentence, to the sentences of a paragraph, and to the paragraphs of a composition.