

Organization within Paragraphs:

Advice from Joseph Williams' *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*

What Readers Need

Sentences that “hang together,” that transition from one idea into another, and that are carefully crafted so that readers are guided through the writing—not left to fend for themselves. Readers need cohesion, coherence, and a logical progression of ideas.

Old/New Flow

Craft sentences so they begin with old information—material readers are familiar with and/or material that appeared earlier in the paragraph (or section) of your writing.

End sentences with information that is new to readers, or that will be surprising to them. Information not previously mentioned in your paragraph and/or information that is a new discovery requires your readers' utmost attention. Orienting your readers by beginning with old information allows readers to cognitively focus on the important new information in each sentence/paragraph.

Consider these two short passages

Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble creates a black hole. So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.

Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble. So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.

Strategy

Try highlighting “old” information in one color and “new” information in another; adjust sentences to begin with old information and end with the new.

Focus

Make your passages “hang together” by giving each paragraph a specific focus.

Make each paragraph's focus clear to readers by crafting sentences around a consistent topic string. Each sentence in the paragraph should have the same topic—perhaps even the same character or action.

Consider these two short passages

The particular ideas toward the beginning of sentences define what a passage is “about” for readers, so a sense of coherence depends on topics. Moving through a paragraph from a cumulatively consistent point of view is made possible by a sequence of topics that seem to constitute this coherent sequence of topicalized ideas. Feelings of dislocation, disorientation, and lack of focus will occur if that doesn't happen.

Topics are crucial for readers because they depend on topics to focus their attention on particular ideas toward the beginning of sentences; topics tell them what a whole passage is “about.” If readers feel that a sequence of topics is coherent, then they will feel they are moving through a paragraph from a cumulatively coherent point of view. If readers don't feel that topics are coherent, they will feel dislocated, disoriented, out of focus.

Strategy

Try underlining the first 5-6 words of every sentence. Read through the paragraph, focusing on those underlined passages. Do they reflect a single topic string?