On the Papers

THE IMPORTANCE OF STRESS: INDICATING THE MOST IMPORTANT WORDS IN A SENTENCE

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Have you heard the advice, "Write the way you speak"? It is bad advice.

When you speak—and especially when you speak in court—you have a number of ways you can demonstrate to your listeners which of your words you would like them to emphasize the most. You can wave your hands or use body language. You can pronounce a word at a higher decibel level than its neighbors. You can vary your sound—higher or lower, softer or louder, faster or slower. But on paper, all these indications of emphasis disappear. You are left only with word choice and word placement.

You, being the author, know what you wanted to say. You look at your sentence: It seems obvious to you how it should be "performed" by any reader. But an author is often the worst person in the world to estimate how others will read a sentence. It is insufficient for you to construct sentences that *can* be interpreted the way you want. You must construct them so a huge percentage of your readers *will actually* interpret them correctly. We all understand the importance of making the best possible decisions concerning word choice; but, surprising though it may seem, word location is a far more important tool to master. How can you manipulate the placement of words to signal to your readers when they should be reading a particular term with special emphasis?

It would be nice, would it not, if we were allowed to print all such to-be-emphasized words in red? Take, for example, the sentence used in teaching typing: "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog." If I told you there was only one word in that sentence uppermost in my mind at the moment, what would be your chances of guessing that word correctly? Given that there are seven important-looking words, your chances would be close to one out of seven, or 15 percent. How would your chances improve if I were to print that word in red? Or even just in all caps?

The quick brown fox jumps over the LAZY dog.

Now you could hardly mistake what was most important to me. If I were to speak the sentence to you, I could emphasize "lazy" with my voice; but on the page, that emphasis cannot be "heard." It must somehow be made apparent to the eye.

What if I were to rewrite the sentence like this: The quick brown fox can jump over the dog because the dog is lazy.

Now more than 90 percent of readers might guess that "laziness" is foremost in my mind. This is a phenomenon peculiar to the English language.

We value any moment in a sentence when the grammatical structure comes to a full halt. I call such a location the "stress position."

A period always accomplishes this closure; but the same effect is realized by any properly used colon or semicolon. It can never be created by a comma, because there are too many different signals a comma can send. We always have to go beyond a comma to find out what kind of pause it is asking us to make. Commas never signal full syntactic closure.

Here is an example I have used with thousands of students and clients to teach the efficacy of the stress position:

> As used in the foundry industry, "turnkey" means responsibility for the satisfactory performance of a piece of equipment in addition to the design, manufacture, and installation of that equipment. P et al. agree that this definition of turnkey is commonly understood in the foundry industry.

Take a moment to underline any words in these two sentences that you think the writer might be wanting you to stress.

When I ask as few as a dozen students or clients to do this, *all* of the following terms get underlined by someone: foundry industry; turnkey; responsibility; satisfactory performance; design, manufacture, and installation; P et al.

Note that "a piece of equipment" fails

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to make this list; and yet, that is the term that occupies the first sentence's sole stress position. The author had only one opportunity to indicate his most significant words, and he blew it. As a result, he left all of us guessing; and in a group of a dozen people, almost everyone will choose a different assortment. Everyone thinks he or she has successfully made sense of the sentence; but often not a single person has correctly guessed what was in the author's mind. Here is the example again, with his sole intended emphasis printed in all caps:

> As used in the foundry industry, "turnkey" means responsibility for the SATISFACTORY PERFORMANCE of a piece of equipment in addition to the design, manufacture, and installation of that equipment. P et al. agree that this definition of turnkey is commonly understood in the foundry industry.

In my experience, in a lecture hall filled with 200 people, no more than four will have underlined "satisfactory performance" and *only* "satisfactory performance." The failure of communication is that severe.

Note that no term in the second sentence of the example is in caps. Any such sentence should not be a sentence. Its information should be tucked into some other sentence—and *not* in a stress position.

When is a sentence too short? When it has no viable candidate for the stress position. When is a sentence too long? When it has more viable candidates for stress positions than there are stress positions. It matters not how many words a sentence contains. It matters a great deal that the number of stress-worthy terms is the same as the number of stress positions.

You have probably heard the advice, "To make a sentence better, make it shorter." Forget it. It is wrong. Here is a good replacement for it: To make a sentence as good as it can be, make sure that the information you wish the reader to stress always appears in a stress position—next to a period, colon, or semicolon. (I will return to the use of the colon and semicolon in a future article.)

> You are your client's advocate. Your prose must act as your advocate.

Am I suggesting that if our author had only transported "satisfactory performance" to the end of a single sentence, most readers would have understood his intentions? Yes. Here is one possibility:

> As P et al. agree, the foundry industry uses the term "turnkey" to signify responsibility not only for the design, manufacture, and installation of a piece of equipment but also for its satisfactory performance.

Now more than 90 percent of readers will get his message.

What if P et al.'s agreement had also been something worthy of stress? Then we might create a second stress position, just for that:

> P et al. agree: The foundry industry uses the term "turnkey" to signify responsibility not only for the design, manufacture, and installation of a piece of equipment but also for its satisfactory performance.

What if the other three functions ("design, manufacture, and installation") were also worthy of stress? Then we might create an additional stress position for them:

> P et al. agree: The foundry industry uses the term "turnkey" to signify responsibility for a piece of equipment's design, manufacture, and installation; but the industry also uses the term to indicate responsibility for its satisfactory performance.

Important news: Locating the stress-worthy information of a sentence elsewhere than in a stress position is the single most widespread and crippling problem in professional English writing today. Of the 245 MDs and PhDs I have worked with at a prominent federal agency, only one did not suffer from this epidemic problem.

Most judges will read your brief only once. Are you really content to have them guessing—sentence after sentence—what word or words they should be emphasizing? You are your client's advocate. Your prose must act as your advocate.

This is neither a mechanical nor a cosmetic concern. Because it involves the core of your thinking in any sentence, you can "repair the damage" only by re-entering your thought process and inquiring, "What *is* the most important thing I want to say here?" It is not an easy fix. If you habitually put the important thing some place other than the stress position, your habit will persist unless you fight against it, consciously and with substantial mental energy.

Begin by using this new advice as a revision tactic. Write your sentence as you normally would. Then go back and ask yourself which word or words you would print in red or in caps if allowed to do so. Get those words right next to a period, colon, or semicolon. Try it. You'll like it. So will your readers.

One last concern: When should you use artificial emphasis—italics, underlining, caps, bold, etc.? Use it whenever the nature of our grammar makes it impossible or awkward to get the emphatic word next to a colon, semicolon, or period. For examples, see all the italicized words in this article. ■

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