

On the Papers

# THE PROGRESS OF THOUGHT: TO MOVE FORWARD, LINK BACKWARD

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When a writer is in the process of writing, no matter how long or short the document will eventually be, most of the writer's attention is focused on the creation of a single sentence. Once the sentence's contents have been deposited on the page, without error, and with some sense of elegance, the writer can comfortably consider that task well accomplished. The same process can continue, sentence after sentence.

For a reader, however, the primary unit of thought is not the sentence but rather the paragraph. Readers do not experience sentences in isolation from one another, but rather in a flow that begins with the paragraph's opening sentence and continues until the paragraph ends. Without explicit instructions from the writer on how to link these sentences together, 10 readers might well come away from the paragraph with 10 or more different interpretations. It is a crucial part of the writing act to send those instructions for logical connection as soon and as clearly as possible. This article attends to the instructions that help a reader connect a new sentence to the one that preceded it.

Without those early instructions, bad things can happen.

1. Imagine you have just finished reading a sentence that contained seven major bits of information, represented here as A B C D E F G .

The next sentence could connect backward in a great variety of ways:

- to any one of the seven individual bits of information;
- to any combination of two or more (AB, BC, DEF, and so forth); or
- to a concept not made explicit by any single previous element, but suggested by a combination of them.

As the reader, you begin the next sentence, eager to know—needing to know—what this backward connection will be. Without it, you will have trouble knowing what to do with the new sentence's contents. But the first bit of information you encounter is Q. Q? There was no Q in the previous sentence. You move on; but

what if next you find R. R? That doesn't help. And then you find S. By this time, you have so much new material to deal with, you have to give up the attempt to make the backward connection. Making sense of this sentence by itself will be success enough; but your attempt to follow the writer's thought progression has been severely compromised.

2. The second bad possibility is even worse. Using sentence example ABCDEFG, let us say that the author wants us to continue forward with G; but not knowing anything about how readers link backward, the author begins the new sentence by mentioning B. Disaster. The reader, seeing B, makes a link backward to the previous sentence's B and is now on the wrong track forward. Once such a mistaken connection is made, it is difficult to undo its damage.

Readers need to know as soon as possible how a new sentence is intended to link back to its predecessor. If you tell them, explicitly, as soon as possible, their train of thought will stay on the tracks you intended.

To explore the problems and solutions involved with this backward link, let us consider a sentence from Chief Justice Warren's majority opinion in the *Miranda* case:

The use of physical brutality and violence is not, unfortunately, relegated to the past or to any part of the country.

*Miranda v. Arizona*, 384 U.S. 436.

There are many linkage possibilities for continuing forward from this sentence, even though it contains only 21 words. The next sentence could hark back to any one of or any combination of the following terms:

- “physical”
- “brutality”
- “violence”
- “unfortunately”

- “relegated”
- “the past”
- “any part of the country”

Here is the beginning of a number of different sentences that could logically follow the sample sentence:

- Mental brutality and violence can often follow, . . .
- Such physical brutality has pervaded police investigations . . .
- Equally unfortunate, courts have long ignored . . .
- All the way back to the era of the Pilgrims, . . .
- Only recently in Kings County, New York, the police . . .

Or the new sentence might strike out in a direction not charted by any single word in the sample sentence:

To date, there has been no outraged public outcry demanding . . .

Any of these are possible and intelligible.

If the new sentence begins with something not appropriately connectable, readers are left to their own devices to create a linkage—one that may or may not be what the writer had in mind. How would you stay on track if the new sentence began with “The presence of an attorney . . .”?

But even worse than not knowing what the link should be is to have the new sentence begin with something *not* intended to be the link. Readers will make that linkage with the first piece of information capable of it. Because readers are going to make that connection whether you like it or not, give them the correct backward link as near to the beginning of every sentence as is possible.

Here is what Chief Justice Warren wrote:

The use of physical brutality and violence is not, unfortunately, relegated to the past or to any part of the country. Only

recently in Kings County, New York, the police brutally beat, kicked and placed lighted cigarette butts on the back of a potential witness under interrogation for the purpose of securing a statement incriminating a third party.

*Miranda*, 384 U.S. at 446.

He connected backward to both “the past” and “any part of the country.” The connection works and is easy to follow because the target words came at the end of the previous sentence. They were the last thing on the reader’s mind; and they occupy what I call “the stress position”—the moment of syntactic closure that invites readers to exert extra emphasis. (For more on the stress position, see *The Importance of Stress: Indicating the Most Important Words in a Sentence*, 38 LITIG, no. 1 (Fall 2011), at 20).

But a new sentence cannot always take off from where the last sentence ended. Were that a hard and fast rule of composition, writers would never be able to spend more than one sentence on a given story. The new sentence might need to continue the story that was being told by its predecessor. Because a sentence tends to be read as the story of whoever or whatever was the grammatical subject of its main clause, that previous subject is an equally viable and readable candidate for the new sentence’s backward link.

Here is our example again, expanded to include the two sentences that preceded it:

In a series of cases decided by this Court long after these studies, the police resorted to physical brutality—beating, hanging, whipping—and to sustained and protracted questioning incommunicado in order to extort confessions. The Commission on Civil Rights in 1961 found much evidence to indicate that “some policemen still resort to physical force to obtain confessions.” The use of physical brutality and violence is not, unfortunately, relegated to the past or to any part of the country. Only recently in Kings County, New York, the police

brutally beat, kicked and placed lighted cigarette butts on the back of a potential witness under interrogation for the purpose of securing a statement incriminating a third party.

*Miranda*, 384 U.S. at 446.

This is relatively clear prose. We could improve it by making two changes to the sentence citing the 1961 study: (1) Make it the story of “some policemen,” which would make it the backward link (there was no “Commission” in the previous sentence); and (2) end the sentence with “physical force,” which makes it easily available as the target of the next sentence’s backward link:

As the Commission on Civil Rights in 1961 found quite rampant, police often obtain confessions by resorting to physical force.

Once we have done that, we note that the only new information in this sentence is the citation of the 1961 report. Why waste a whole sentence on that? The solution: Just cite the report. The resulting paragraph:

In a series of cases decided by this Court long after these studies, the police resorted to physical brutality—beating, hanging, whipping—and to sustained and protracted questioning incommunicado in order to extort confessions. (Report of the Commission on Civil Rights, 1961.) The use of physical brutality and violence is not, unfortunately, relegated to the past or to any part of the country. Only recently in Kings County, New York, the police brutally beat, kicked and placed lighted cigarette butts on the back of a potential witness under interrogation for the purpose of securing a statement incriminating a third party.

The backward-linking connections are made up front targeting either the “whose story” or the stress position of the previous sentences. Linking backward moves your reader forwards. Thought flows. ■