

On the Papers

WHOSE STORY IS THIS SENTENCE? DIRECTING READERS' PERCEPTIONS OF NARRATIVE

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Please take a moment to rank the following three sentences by quality of writing. Which is best? Which worst?

(A) The defendant deprived the plaintiff of his contractual rights by refusing to forward the shipment.

(B) The plaintiff was deprived of his contractual rights by the defendant's refusal to forward the shipment.

(C) The refusal to forward the shipment by the defendant deprived the plaintiff of his contractual rights.

If you chose (A) as the best, you were wrong. If you chose (C) as the best, you were wrong. If you chose (B) as the best, you too were wrong. The right answer to that question is always, "It depends." On what does it depend? It depends in part on whose story the sentence was trying to tell. This article discusses how you, as a writer, can control—insofar as that is possible—whose story a reader perceives

you to be telling in any given sentence. There is no rule here—only high probabilities; but those probabilities are high enough for you to take them into consideration with every sentence you write.

Sentences (A), (B), and (C) cannot be saying completely different things, since all three deal with the same two people and a single action. However—though perhaps less obvious—the three sentences cannot be identical in meaning, because in each the information appears in a different order. Word order, word placement, and sentence structure all send important signals to readers concerning what function or functions each word is intended to perform.

If we could make a new rule in English that a sentence should be read as being the story of whatever person, thing, or idea is printed in green, then no one (excepting those who are color-blind) would ever misperceive an author's intentions as to whose story it is supposed to be. Color "the defendant" green in each of these three sample sentences, and each

becomes the story of the defendant. But they won't let us do that.

What do they let us do? That is best put not in terms of what "they" allow, but rather in terms of what we tend to do most of the time—even though no one ever taught us to do it in school. It is what I call a "reader expectation."

Readers tend to read a clause as being the story of whoever or whatever shows up as the grammatical subject of that clause. They tend to do that no matter how you as author would like the sentence to be interpreted. Therefore, for the three previous sample sentences, most readers will read (A) as the story of the defendant, (B) as the story of the plaintiff, and (C) as the story of "the refusal to forward the shipment." Since readers will tend to do this whether you want them to or not, it makes sense that you become aware that each of your clauses will be a narrative told from the perspective of its grammatical subject.

In a one-clause sentence, the grammatical subject will usually be read as whose story the sentence will be. But what if your sentence contains two (or more) clauses? Compare these examples:

(D) Even though the plaintiff delivered the goods on time, the defendant chose to refuse them.

(E) The defendant chose to refuse the goods, even though the plaintiff delivered them on time.

In (D), the first clause is the story of the plaintiff, and the second is the story of the defendant. Whose story is the sentence as a whole? Most readers will say it is the defendant's. In (E), the first clause is the story of the defendant, and the second is the story of the plaintiff. Whose story is the sentence as a whole? Most readers again will say it is the defendant's. This tells us that in sentences with more than one clause, readers tend to read the sentence as a whole as being

the story of whoever or whatever shows up as the grammatical subject of the main clause. In both cases here, the plaintiff shows up in the “even though” clause; the defendant shows up as the subject of the “main” clause.

I put these terms in quotation marks because I use them differently from your grammar books. There are only three units of discourse we need concern ourselves with in trying to control writing: the main clause; the qualifying clause (my term); and the phrase. A “main clause” has a subject and a verb and can stand by itself as a sentence. A “qualifying clause” has a subject and a verb but cannot stand by itself as a sentence. A “phrase” is a word grouping that lacks either a subject or a verb—or both. For a reader, a main clause has greater weight than a qualifying clause; and a qualifying clause has greater weight than a phrase. It is that simple.

A main clause, therefore, tells the sentence’s main story. The grammatical subject of that clause is therefore the “whose story” of the sentence as a whole.

That connects to a concern about sentence length, especially in legal writing. I am very much opposed to all those well-intentioned writing teachers and Plain English promoters who tell us to make sentences better by making them shorter. That is a false issue. There are wonderful 150-word sentences and deplorable 10-word sentences. When the length of a sentence becomes burdensome, it is usually because something has gone wrong with the structure. Consider this lengthy sentence:

(F1) Even though the plaintiff delivered the goods on time, within two hours of the expiration date as explicitly delineated by Section 27(A)(2)(d) of the contract, and accompanied them with the appropriate papers, duly signed and counter-signed by the appropriate officials, who had called ahead to indicate they were soon to be on their way to the

designated delivery spot (see Section 27(B)(i)(a) of the contract), the defendant chose to refuse them.

It is not the mere length—71 words—that makes this sentence hard to read; rather, it is the nature of its structure, which shows a lack of concern for or knowledge of how readers go about reading. Whose story is this sentence as a whole? It is the story of the grammatical subject of the main clause—in this case, the defendant. When do we learn that

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identity? Far too late. We have been reading for 66 words—the equivalent of about three normal professional sentences—before we are informed that all of those 66 words had been telling us a story about the defendant. Give us that knowledge up front, where we expect it to appear, and the same information becomes far easier to digest on first reading.

(F2) The defendant chose to refuse the goods, despite the plaintiff’s extraordinary efforts to comply with the delivery requirements: The plaintiff delivered the goods on time, within two hours of the expiration date as explicitly delineated by Section 27(A)(2)(d) of the contract; the plaintiff accompanied them with the appropriate papers, duly signed and counter-signed by the appropriate officials, as required by Section 27(B)(i)(a) of the contract; and, in addition and without being required to do so, those officials had called ahead to indicate they were soon to be on their way to the designated delivery spot.

This revision, (F2), a full 95 words, is actually 24 words longer than the original, (F1). It is significantly easier to read, I would argue, because at every moment it is so clear whose story is being told. The first main clause is the story of the defendant. What action did that defendant do? We look to the verb: The defendant “chose to refuse.” After the colon, we get a series of three main clauses that form (as the colon had promised) a list that redefines the term “extraordinary efforts.” Each subject/verb combination presents us with another “whose story”/“what’s happening” sub-story: “the plaintiff delivered”; “the plaintiff accompanied them”; and “officials called ahead.”

In a previous issue of *LITIGATION* (Winter 2012), I argued that readers tend to look to the verb to find out what is going on in a sentence. Combining that with the “whose story” argument here, the combination of subject-verb tells the reader whose story it is and what is happening. That core of information is essential for readers of English to have as soon as possible in a sentence. It also must be accurate. If your main point in this sentence is what the defendant did, do not let the plaintiff appear as the grammatical subject of your main clause.

It makes sense, therefore, not to create sentences with two main clauses on either side of a comma followed by an “and.”

The plaintiff did this, and the defendant did that.

We know whose story each clause is; but whose story is the sentence as a whole? The “and” fails to tell us how to put these two clauses together. It is a weak structure: Avoid it. ■

[I will continue this topic next issue.]