

DISCOURSE PRINCIPLES

Discourse (i.e.: sentences in combination) has its own rules. Knowledge of grammar and vocabulary still does not guarantee the production of a good English text. Actually, lots of written (medical, scientific...) articles are rejected by international publishers every day. There are no grammar or lexical mistakes in those articles written by nonEnglish speakers, but they are often lacking **cohesion** and coherence, which makes them virtually unreadable.

Whenever you practise your writing skills, try to stick to these **three “discourse factors”**, i.e.: three general principles that will help you order your information (sentences, paragraphs...) in a safe way. The best thing about these rules is that they also apply to most Indoeuropean languages around us.

I. Principle of **END-FOCUS**.

The information in a message can be roughly divided into given information and new information.

NEW INFORMATION ⇒ is what is thought to be new for the hearer/reader.

GIVEN INFORMATION ⇒ is information which the speaker assumes is already known to the hearer (i.e.: old information).

New information is typically the most important part of a message and is usually placed towards the **end** of the clause.

Given (= old) information, by contrast, is the point from which new information is developed. So we often choose as the subject a person or thing that is already being talked about or that has already been mentioned, or something that the speaker and hearer are both familiar with, or even some new information that is not the main point of the message.

In accordance with the general tendency in communication to proceed from the known to the unknown, we typically put given information before new.

WHICH OF THESE TWO REPLIES IS PREFERABLE?

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1) What causes asthma? | a) Allergens cause it. |
| | b) It's caused by allergens. |
| 2) -Who wrote " <u>The Tempest</u> "? | a) Shakespeare did. |
| | b) It was written by Shakespeare. |
| 3) How's Joe these days? | a) Oh fine. He's just got married to a very nice girl. |
| | b) Oh fine. A very nice girl's just got married to him. |
| 4) I can't find my clothes. | a) Well, my coat's on your trousers. |
| | b) Well, your trousers are under my coat. |

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING SOUND MORE NATURAL?

- 1... a) There's a police officer waiting outside.
b) A police officer is waiting outside.
- 2... a) Children were playing in the street.
b) There were children playing in the street.
- 3... a) No letters have come in for me, have they?
b) There aren't any letters for me, are there?
- 4... a) I was given lots of birthday presents last year.
b) Lots of presents were given to me on my birthday last year.
- 5... a) That magazine is difficult to read.
b) It's difficult to read that magazine.
c) To read that magazine is difficult.

WRITE DOWN THE QUESTIONS TO WHICH THE FOLLOWING ARE ANSWERS:

- A) Question: *Who did...*
Answer: *John showed his drawing to Rona.*
- B) Question: *What did...*
Answer: *John showed Rona his drawing.*

II. Principle of TOPIC CONTINUITY.

In English there is a tendency for the constituent (the phrase) which identifies the main topic (= what the sentence is mainly about!) to come at the beginning of the clause or sentence.

The initial constituent (phrase), technically called the “**theme**”, serves as the point of departure for the rest of the message. It announces what the sentence is about. For example,

- (i) *"Our dog bit the postman this morning."* is mainly about our dog, whereas
- (ii) *"The postman was bitten by our dog this morning."* is mainly about the postman.

What comes first in a clause is thus of considerable importance and we often take trouble to place a particular item in initial position in order to achieve our chosen emphasis or focus.

In written language, we often like sentences in the same paragraph to have a similar theme (= the initial item in a sentence) to signal that they are about the same topic, and to bind the paragraph together.

- ★ Let's see how this principle influences our choice of grammatical structure.
Continue each of the following initial sentences in a narrative:

- 1) The Prime Minister stepped off the plane...
 - a)... She was immediately surrounded by journalists.
 - b)... Journalists immediately surrounded her.
- 2) They stepped out of the coach and...
 - a)...the owner of the hotel greeted them.
 - b)...they were greeted by the owner of the hotel.
- 3) James had planned to take the plane to Vancouver but...
 - a)... an air-controllers' strike delayed it.
 - b)... it was delayed by an air-controllers' strike.
- 4) We were worried about the carpet...
 - a)...It had chewing gum stuck all over it.
 - b)...Chewing gum was stuck all over it.
- 5) My flat-mate wanted to trace an old friend because...
 - a)...he had changed his address.
 - b)...his address had been changed.
- 6) Della Jones, one of our best-loved singers, is well known for her opera repertoire...
 - a) Her greatest operatic roles have included Rosina in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and the title role in *La Cenerentola*.
 - b) Rosina in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and the title role in *La Cenerentola* are included among her greatest operatic roles.
- 7) One of the great comic stars of the 1960s was Walter Matthau...
 - a) Particularly noteworthy was Jack Lemmon's film work with him.
 - b) His film work with Jack Lemmon being particularly noteworthy.
- 8) Elisabeth inherited a kingdom torn by religious strife...
 - a) Her first action was to try and pacify the rival fanatics.
 - b) Pacifying the rival fanatics was her first action.
- 9) Potential residents will find everything they need in the Dinglewood rest home in Harwich...
 - a) Among its features are twenty-four hour nursing care and luxurious private rooms.
 - b) Luxurious private rooms and twenty-four hour nursing care are among its features.
- 10) But I had nothing to do with it, Your Honour...
 - a) It was my twin brother that the police saw outside the warehouse.
 - b) It was the police that saw my twin brother outside the warehouse.

- 11) Built in 1078 by Bishop Gundulf for William the Conqueror, the Tower of London is one of the oldest landmarks in the city...
- a. Today its main claim to fame is the recently built Jewel House containing the fabulous crown jewels of Great Britain.
 - b. The recently built Jewel House containing the fabulous crown jewels of Great Britain is its main claim to fame today.
- 12) Birch trees can reach 30 meters in height and have a very vigorous growth pattern...
- a. Damage can be caused to drains and house walls if they are too close to the particularly fast-growing roots.
 - b. The roots are particularly fast-growing and can cause damage if they are close to drains and house walls.

III. Principle of END-WEIGHT.

In English there is a preference for placing long, complex, "heavy" constituents towards the end of the clause, because in this position they seem easier to understand or process.

Very complex or long noun phrases in subject position are avoided, as are very short light phrases in post-verbal position.

* Decide which of the following pairs sound less awkward:

- 1...
 - a) Children are sometimes discouraged by the length of time it takes to learn a musical instrument.
 - b) The length of time it takes to learn a musical instrument sometimes discourages children.
- 2...
 - a) To tell us everything you know is important.
 - b) It's important to tell us everything you know.
- 3...
 - a) She finds to understand spoken English easy.
 - b) She finds it easy to understand spoken English.
- 4...
 - a) That we had lost the way was obvious.
 - b) It was obvious that we had lost the way.
- 5...
 - a) A striking feature of the central area of the capital are the elegant classical squares which were originally laid out by aristocratic developers in the eighteenth century.
 - b) The elegant classical squares which were originally laid out by aristocratic developers in the eighteenth century are a striking feature of the central area of the capital.