

The Writer's Block: Writing Better Sentences

by Nancy Lawler Dickhute

Part of the effectiveness of Abraham Lincoln's presidency was his communications skills. He knew how to take a sentence and deliver meaning, sincerity and artistry in a single line. As lawyers, we can benefit from Lincoln's mastery of prose by studying some of the effective principles that make his sentences memorable. Among these are strong use of the stress position, sentence openings, subject and verb proximity, varying sentence length and parallel construction.

To illustrate, consider the structure of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address:

Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

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Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battle field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate — we can not consecrate — we can not hallow — this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us — that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion — that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain — that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

This address, only 10 sentences long, has long been lauded for its pathos and dignity in honoring the dead at Gettysburg in such a concise fashion. How did Lincoln do this?

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The Stress Position

Generally speaking, in English the reader remembers the end of the sentence most, the beginning next and the middle of the sentence least of all. As evidenced by the language of the Address, Lincoln understood the use of the stress position: putting the idea the writer wants the reader to remember most at the end of a sentence or clause. Part of the reasoning behind this principle is that syntactic closure (using a period, a semicolon, a dash, or a comma and conjunction to end a clause) allows the reader to momentarily pause before reading further. With such momentary pauses, the reader absorbs the idea just expressed. Given most readers' propensity to remember ideas closest in time to that pause, they remember the last piece of information most. Thus, in the opening sentence of the Address, the proposition, "all men are created equal," is the idea the reader remembers most. This effective use of the stress position creates a context which pervades the rest of the speech. In one's own writing then, the writer should put what is intended to be memorable at the end of each sentence.

Sentence Opening

Equally impressive is the **beginning** of each sentence of the Address. As the second most memorable part of the sentence, the beginning of each sentence serves two functions: **1)** it ties a previous thought to a new one, and **2)** it introduces a new idea. To be effective, the beginning of a new sentence must include some part of the previous one before moving on. Note how the Address does this consistently by repeating a key term or phrase before introducing a new thought. Thus in paragraph two, the first sentence speaks of a "great civil war," the second sentence links that concept to a "battlefield of that war," and the third dedicates a portion of that "field" to the war dead. This link, <war to battle field to field>, ties the sentences together while allowing Lincoln to add new ideas to each sentence.

In addition, Lincoln starts each sentence with a subject and verb located close to each other. Again in paragraph two, the reader finds "we are engaged," "we are met," and "we have come" as the subject and verb of the first three sentences.

These are effective openings, in part,

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because the reader does not have to search through a number of intervening words to connect the subject and verb. Often when many words separate a subject from its verb, readers figuratively hold their breath until they find the verb. The intervening words are treated as an interruption and their meaning is lost. Lincoln avoids losing his meaning by keeping the subject and verb side-by-side. In one's own writing then, if writers do not want the reader to miss important ideas, they shouldn't bury them in the middle of lengthy sentences.

Varied Sentence Lengths

This admonition leads to the next principle of good sentences: vary their lengths. At least one writer maintains that the best sentences in English are 25 words or less.¹ Twenty-five words is enough to discuss an idea without losing the reader. With the exception of the last sentence, the Gettysburg Address adheres to this principle.² Lincoln knew that to keep the listener's attention, his phrasing needed to be succinct, yet slightly varied. Likewise in legal writing, sentences with approximately 25 words work well in expressing a position, stating facts or reporting the law.

However, if all sentences were exactly 25 words, the reader would soon become bored. Readers want variety in length and structure. Thus 25 words is an average.³ (The Address averages 21.) Plus, readers expect that longer sentences will carry meaning, while shorter sentences create impact. Readers study longer sentences expecting to find detail there. Short sentences act to drive home a single important point with conviction or direct

the reader's attention to a major idea. Consider the second paragraph of the Address. Out of its seven sentences, two are designed specifically to create impact: sentences two and four.

The first sentence sets up the premise, can a country founded on equality survive? The second sentence directs the reader's attention to the battlefield which tested that premise, using only 11 words. The third sentence makes the battlefield a symbol for equality, and the fourth drives home the point, "It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this." Lincoln balances the proposition of equality with the necessity of recognizing the battlefield as a symbol of equality. By varying his sentence lengths, Lincoln explains his position without boring the reader. You can too. Ask yourself, "Do I have an idea which I need to emphasize?" If so, consider either introducing it with an impact statement or concluding an explanation with one. Choose impact statements carefully. Place them strategically throughout a paragraph but remember not to overuse them. Like any stylistic device, if it is overused, it loses its impact.

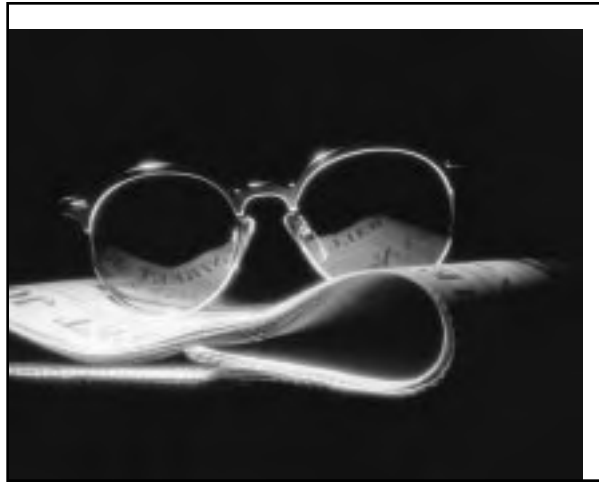
Parallel Construction

Finally, Lincoln mastered the art and grammatical requirement of parallel construction. Parallel construction presents ideas intended to be construed together in the same form: as a series of nouns, verbs, adjectives, phrases and even clauses. Parallel forms flow better and are easier to understand than ones that mix forms. For example, a mixed form would read, "The defendant lied, cheated and made misrepresentations to plaintiff." By keeping all the descriptive words as verbs, "lied, cheated and misrepresented," the writer maintains parallel construction. In the Address the reader encounters parallel construction from the first sentence on, where Lincoln describes our nation as "**conceived** in liberty and **dedicated** to the proposition..." Here, both descriptive terms are presented as participle phrases, verb forms which act as adjectives. Other examples of parallel construction abound in the Address. Look at the begin-

ning of the third paragraph, “we can not dedicate — we can not consecrate — we can not hallow” (parallel verbs) and its end, “government of the people, by the people, for the people” (parallel prepositional phrases.) These structures were all intentionally used to grab the reader’s attention by presenting the idea smoothly. So too, in our writing, check each time you use the word “and”, “or”, “but” or any other conjunction, as well as any time you introduce lists with a colon or separate items with a semi-colon. The items contained in these lists should read in parallel form.

Conclusion

What can Lincoln’s talent teach us as attorneys? At the very least, a well-pruned sentence is no accident. The placement of key ideas at the end of a sentence is not a coincidence but a strategy to impress an idea upon a reader. Putting subjects and verbs close together provide some assurance important information won’t be lost. Sentence length is also a strategic tool; good writers never bore their readers with sentences that are always the same



length. Just as a painter varies the strokes on a canvas to create interest; so too, writers need longer sentences to explain an idea and shorter ones to emphasize them. Finally, ideas flow that are presented in parallel form: two or more verbs, nouns, adjectives, phrases, clauses.

The idea behind all these principles or rules is the same: to communicate one’s ideas effectively the first time. By the same token, good structure is almost invisible; the reader never notes a writer’s use of the stress position or parallel construction. No, the reader just understands the message. Improved struc-

ture is merely a vehicle to that end. If sentences are easy to read, the reader will remember only the writer’s thoughts. That’s the goal. 🗡️

Endnotes:

¹ C. Edward Good, *Mightier Than the Sword* 15 (1989).

² The last sentence is long very long, 82 words, but Lincoln never lost that sentence’s meaning. He broke up the ideas with syntactic closure and dashes so that each idea is considered and remembered. If the reader reads between the dashes, each idea is between 10 and 23 words long. Remember as well this is a speech meant to be

delivered orally, so pause and inflection aid the listener in understanding the ideas.

³ To determine your average sentence length, count the words in a paragraph and divide by the number of sentences in the paragraph. Use several paragraphs to get a more accurate average.