Sentence Strategies to Make Your Writing “Flow”

Worried that your writing is choppy? Want to stay true to the complexities of your subject without leaving readers feeling swamped and confused? Try these tips for sentence-level concision, clarity, and voice from George Copen’s and Judith Swan’s “The Science of Scientific Writing.”

1. Follow the grammatical subject as soon as possible with its verb.

   For example, instead of
   “The MYCN gene, which is a member of the Myc family of oncogenes, plays important roles in cell growth, division, and self-destruction.”
   
   a writer could say:
   “A member of the Myc family of oncogenes, the MYCN gene plays important roles in cell growth, division, and self-destruction.”

2. Place the “new information” you want to highlight in the stress position (usually at the end of a sentence) and place “old information” (material already stated in the previous sentence) in the topic position (at the start of the sentence) to clearly show the new sentence’s link to the previous sentences and to contextualize and spotlight the new information now being introduced.

   For example, instead of
   “Research regarding the benefits of almond yogurt is lacking even though the benefits of almond milk have been documented. Almond yogurt ….”
   
   a writer could say:
   “While the benefits of almond milk have been documented, research regarding the benefits of almond yogurt is lacking. Almond yogurt …”

3. Place the person or thing whose “story” a sentence is telling—the sentence’s true subject—at the beginning of the sentence, in the topic position.

   For example, instead of
   “Recently, a subject of interest for scholars studying medieval English politics has been the Magna Carta.”
   
   a writer could say:
   “Recently, the Magna Carta has been a subject of interest for scholars studying medieval English politics.”

4. Whenever possible, use specific and active verbs (not “is” or “are”) to articulate the action of each sentence.

   Instead of
   “The focus of this paper will be the diagnostic criteria of generalized anxiety disorder.
   
   a writer could say:
   “This paper will focus on the diagnostic criteria of generalized anxiety disorder.”