

Improving Clarity at the Sentence Level:

By following the guidelines described below, and organizing the content of paragraphs to accommodate reader expectations, your readers will be able to follow your thoughts more easily. Using the sample paragraph below, follow the guidelines for revising for clarity at the sentence level.

Original:

The smallest of the URF's (URFA6L), a 207-nucleotide (nt) reading frame overlapping out of phase the NH₂- terminal portion of the adenosinetriphosphatase (ATPase) subunit 6 gene has been identified as the animal equivalent of the recently discovered yeast H⁺- ATPase subunit 8 gene.

Revision Strategy #1: Make sure the subject and its verb are close to one another

When you are attempting to express many complex ideas at the same time, the subject and the verb can end up very far away from one another. When information spills into the space between the subject and the verb, readers end up skimming this material and missing important information.

Original:

In this sentence the **subject** and its **verb** are over 20 words away from each other:

The smallest of the URF's (URFA6L), a 207-nucleotide (nt) reading frame overlapping out of phase the NH₂- terminal portion of the adenosinetriphosphatase (ATPase) subunit 6 gene has been identified as the animal equivalent of the recently discovered yeast H⁺- ATPase subunit 8 gene.

Readers must wait a long time before finding out what happens to the subject and may need to read the having to read the sentence several times to understand the content. By moving the subject and verb closer to one another, you can remove the “interrupting material” or move it elsewhere.

Revision:

Two alternatives for revising this sentence:

1. If the interrupting material is significant, find a different way to incorporate it into the sentence:

The smallest of the URF's is URFA6L, a 207-nucleotide (nt) reading frame overlapping out of phase the NH₂-terminal portion of the adenosinetriphosphatase (ATPase) subunit 6 gene;

*Examples and explanations from Gopen, George D. and Judith A. Swan. “The Science of Scientific Writing,” *American Scientist* 78, no.6 (November-December 1990): pp. 550-558.

it has been identified as the animal equivalent of the recently discovered yeast H⁺-ATPase subunit 8 gene.

2. If the “interrupting material” is tangential and “diverts attention from more important ideas,” (552) remove it from the sentence so that it doesn’t distract the reader:

The smallest of the URF’s (URFA6L) has been identified as the animal equivalent of the recently discovered yeast H⁺-ATPase subunit 8 gene.

Revision Strategy #2: Organize “old” and “new” information in a sentence by using the “topic” and “stress” positions

The Topic Position: Place more familiar information at the beginning of a sentence

The topic position of a sentence prepares your reader for the new material you want to emphasize - or the “take away” message. You can use this part of the sentence to establish a link to “old” material you have already discussed in your writing and to build a foundation, or context, for the “new” material you are about to introduce to your reader.

Readers expect to find this explanatory material at the beginning of a sentence. The topic position in a sentence will both establish the links between sentences in your paragraph, and prepare your reader for the new information that you will introduce as you move from sentence to sentence. This technique preserves the logical flow of a paragraph and an argument: first, you call upon information more familiar to your reader and situate them in your area of interest, and then you introduce your new and interesting material.

The Stress Position: Place new material at the end of a sentence

When you write a sentence, you likely have a “take away” message for your readers. You want this material emphasized in your sentence, so your readers understand how important it is as they move forward in their reading. You can do this by using the “stress position” in the sentence.

Your readers expect to find the material you want to emphasize *at the end* of the sentence. If that “emphatic material” is located elsewhere, your readers may misinterpret your intentions or focus on less important material.

The revised paragraph has arranged the topic and stress positions in each sentence, so that new material can be found at the end of a sentence and contextual or linking material can be found at the beginning of a sentence. This includes transitional words to help establish the relationship between sentences.

You will also notice that the topic position of the sentence also includes the subject of the sentence. Accordingly, the active verb in the sentence establishes a direct link between old and new.

Revision:

The smallest of the URF’s, URFA6L, has been identified as the animal equivalent of the recently discovered yeast H⁺-ATPase subunit 8 gene; but the functional significance of other URFs has been more elusive. Recently, however, several human URF’s have been shown to encode subunits of rotenone-sensitive NADH ubiquinone oxido-reductase.

Useful Links

<http://www.americanscientist.org/issues/feature/the-science-of-scientific-writing/>

This is the original Gopen and Swan article from which this handout draws.

<http://cgi.duke.edu/web/sciwriting/index.php>

This is an interactive Scientific Writing Resource from the Duke Graduate School. It also addresses clarity, emphasis, subjects, cohesion, and simplicity in scientific writing. It provides more specific examples of common clarity problems, such as nominalization.

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/600/01/>

Purdue's resource on clarity in writing uses many of the same principles as Gopen and Swan, and the Scientific Writing Resource. It discusses nominalization, active voice, and transitional words.

http://twp.duke.edu/uploads/media_items/clarity-conciseness.original.pdf

Duke Writing Studio's more concise guide for clarity and conciseness in writing.