

IX TOP 10 BASIC PRINCIPLES OF COMPOSITION

It's now the time for our top ten basic principles of composition. I follow here the famous little book called **The Elements of Style**, which is by many considered as the Bible for young journalists. In only a few dozens of pages, this book summarized most rules and typical mistakes in English language.

RULE 10 **Keep related words together**

The position of the words in a sentence shows their relation. You should connect and place together those words that are related, or your sentences can be ambiguous and unclear.

Compare these examples

You can call your mother in London and tell her all about George's taking you out to dinner for just two dollars.

For just two dollars you can call your mother in London and tell her all about George's taking you out to dinner.

What is the *difference* here? Of course, it is the call that costs two dollars, not the dinner, otherwise the sentence would mean that you want to complain to your mother that George is stingy, whereas, actually, you are glad that George took her out to dinner and wants to tell that to her mother.

The second example is from the **actual newspapers**:

New York's first commercial human-sperm bank opened Friday with semen samples from eighteen men frozen in a stainless steel tank.

New York's first commercial human-sperm bank opened Friday when semen were taken from eighteen men. The samples were then frozen and stored in a stainless steel tank.

The problem with the first sentence is, of course, that it is not the men that were frozen, but the samples.

RULE 9 **In summaries, keep to one tense**
When you are summarizing the action, use the present tense. In summarizing a poem, story, or novel, also use the present, though you may use the past if it seems more natural to do so. If the summary is in the present tense, a latter action should be in the perfect; and action that occurred earlier in the past perfect. But, whatever tense you chose, be consistent.

RULE 8 **Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end**
Usual place for a word or words that should be most important is at the end. Different word order can make your sentences quite different.

Have a look at these examples

If you say that *This steel is principally used for making razors, because of its hardness*, the emphasis is on hardness;

But, if you say: *Because of its hardness, this steel is used principally for making razors*, then you have a **different emphasis**.

So, if you are writing about razors, the second example is actually what you wanted to say or emphasize.

RULE 7 **Avoid a succession of loose sentences**
It is often the case in our writing to make complex, long sentences connected with a number of and, but, which, that and so on. It is much better to avoid monotony by breaking them into two, using semicolon, periodic sentences and the like.

RULE 6 **Avoid a succession of loose sentences**
Good writing is **concise**. As *William Stunk* claims: "*A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts.*"
This does not mean to make all your sentences and writing short, but that every word you use has its place and purpose.

RULE 5 Use definite, specific, concrete language.
Prefer the specific to the general, the definite to the vague, the concrete to the abstract. For example:

A period of unfavourable weather set in.

It rained every day for a week.

He showed satisfaction as he took possession of his well-earned reward.

He grinned as he pocketed the coin.

RULE 4 Put statements in positive form
Try to avoid hesitation, non-commitment, and evasion. Or, in other words, don't write or speak like a politician.

*He was not very often on time – **He usually came late***

The 'Taming of the Shrew' is rather weak in spots. Shakespeare does not portray Katherine as a very admirable character, not does Bianca remain long in memory as an important character in Shakespeare's works.

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The women in 'The Taming of the Shrew' are unattractive. Katherine is disagreeable, Bianca is insignificant.

RULE 3 Use the active voice
This rule doesn't mean that we should completely discard the passive voice, which is often useful and sometimes necessary. However, too often in English people tend to overuse it.

Take this example for instance

The dramatists of the Restoration are little esteemed today.

Modern readers have little esteem for the dramatists of the Restoration.

The first would be the more appropriate if one writes about the dramatists of the Restoration, the second in a paragraph on the tastes of modern readers. The need to make a particular word the subject of the sentence will often, as in these examples, determine which voice is to be used. But using active voice is still often a better way to write lively, emphatically and with force.

There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground.

Dead leaves covered the ground.

*It was not long before she was very sorry
that she had said what she had.*

She soon repented her words.

Note, in the examples above, that when a sentence is made stronger, it usually becomes shorter.

Thus, brevity is a by-product of vigour.

RULE 2

Make the paragraph the unit of composition

As we discussed earlier, the paragraph is a proper unit. As a rule, begin each paragraph either with a sentence that suggests the topic or with a sentence that helps the transition. Paragraph can be of any length, as long as they contain one logical block or a unit. In general, remember that paragraphing calls for a good eye as well as a logical mind.

RULE 1

Choose a suitable design and hold to it

A basic structural design underlies every kind of writing. Writers will in part follow this design, in part deviate from it, according to their skills, their needs, and the unexpected events that accompany the act of composition. Writing, to be effective, must follow closely the thoughts of the writer, but not necessarily in the order in which those thoughts occur. This calls for a scheme of procedure. In some cases, the best design is no design, as with a love letter, which is simply an outpouring, or with a casual essay, which is a ramble. But in most cases, planning must be a deliberate prelude to writing. The first principle of composition, therefore, is to foresee or determine the shape of what is to come and pursue that shape.