Editing: Creating Reader-Friendly Sentences

Sentences built to be reader friendly allow the reader to easily follow the thought process of the writer. The writer must take into consideration what context the reader needs in order to understand the point. Not all sentences are equally easy to read. Consider the two sentences below. Do you find A or B easier to read?

(A) "A determination of involvement of lipid-linked chains in the assembly of oligosaccharide *in vivo* was the principal aim of this study."

(B) "The study's principal aim focused on how lipid-linked chains are involved in the assembly of oligosaccharide *in vivo*."

(Both examples from Bizup and Williams, 91.)

Most people will find sentence B easier because it follows four principles of readable sentences: *start with your main point, arrange old ideas before new ideas, keep subjects short and simple, and pair "action" verbs with "doer" subjects*. You can find a **summary in Table 1** on **page 4**. Remember that you don't have to write each sentence perfectly and use all four principles every time. When you write and edit your papers, aim to create sentences that are written with the reader in mind—give them what they need to understand your point. This handout will review the four principles and then apply them to sentence B in **Table 2 on page 4**.

Concept 1: Start with Your Main Point

The following sentence is **hard to read** because the main point of the sentence (underlined in blue) is buried at the end. The reader will likely be confused by having several details at the beginning but not knowing the necessary context.

> **Not this:** Health saving accounts and Roth IRA accounts which workers manage themselves and their employers deposit matching funds into result in workers taking more responsibility for their own retirement.

The next sentence is **easy to read** because the reader learns the main point (underlined in blue) at the start. The main point provides the context necessary to easy absorb the details that follow.

> **Do this:** Workers take more responsibility for their retirement when they manage their own health saving accounts and Roth IRA accounts and their employers deposit matching funds.

Concept 2: Arrange Old Ideas Before New Ideas

The following sentences are **hard to read** because the first and second sentence do not flow into each other. The first sentence introduces its topic (five big problems—as underlined in blue), but the next sentence starts to talk about plastic levels, which is likely to confuse the reader because there is no deliberate connection made.

> **Not this:** The TEDx Speaker spoke about environmental challenges yesterday, and she listed five big environmental problems the European Union will face in the next five years. *The levels of plastic concentration* are increasing rapidly and creating an ocean garbage belt: this was the first problem she described.

The next sentences are **easy to read** because the reader can see the deliberate connections between sentences one and two. The first sentence introduces that there are five problems (underlined in blue), and the second sentence beings with the phrase "the first problem." The reader can easily follow and understand.

> **Do this:** The TEDx Speaker spoke about environmental challenges yesterday, and she listed five big environmental problems the European Union will face in the next five years. The first problem was the rapid increase in plastic levels, which is creating an ocean garbage belt.

Concept 3: Keep Subjects Short and Simple

The following sentences are **hard to read** because the subject of the sentence (underlined in blue) is much longer and more complex than the second half of the sentence. When the writer puts most of the information at the front of the sentence—and takes a long time to get to the main verb—then the material is harder for the reader to understand. Most likely, they will need to read the sentence again.

> **Not this:** "Great strides in the early and accurate diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease have been made in recent years" (*Bizup and Williams, 87*).

The next sentence is **easy to read** because the subject is short and easy for the reader to grasp. The use of a short introductory phrase (such as "in recent years") is useful to help keep subjects short. The majority of the longer details are put after the verb when the reader is ready for them.

> **Do this:** "In recent years, researchers have made great strides in the early and accurate diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease" (*Bizup and Williams, 89*).

Concept 4: Pair "Action" Verbs with "Doer" Subjects

The following sentence is **hard to read.** In addition to being long, the subject (underlined in blue) does not have a clear doer, such as a person, company, designer, or team. The verb (in bold) is also weak because it is a form of "to be." In general, strong verbs describe specific actions in the active voice (e.g., conduct), instead of the passive voice (e.g., to be conducted).

> **Not this:** Improving the user experience for cross-device design and product conversions **were** the key factors during usability analysis.

The next sentence is **easy to read.** In addition to being short, the subject (underlined in blue) is a doer, in this case a company. The use of a short introductory phrase (such as "during usability analysis") is a useful tool to provide important context, while keeping the subject clear. The verb (in bold) is in the active voice and describes a clear action.

> **Do this:** During usability analysis, Lyst **studied** key aspects of consumer experience, specifically improving cross-device design and product conversions.

The next **easy-to-read** sentence would most likely be found in STEM writing. Various STEM disciplines prefer the passive voice. The subject below (underlined in blue) is the test type, and the verb (in bold) is in passive voice. **If you are a STEM writer**, be sure to check with your class, journal, or conference for their requirements. In general, sentences written like this will be less clear, but it is important to keep in mind reader and context expectations. You will still want to keep the subjects as short and simple as possible.

> **Sometimes do this (in STEM disciplines):** Usability analysis **was undertaken** to improve the cross-device design and product conversions because they are the key aspects of consumer experience.

Table 1: Easy-to-Read Concept Definitions

Concept	Explanation
Start with your main point	Lead your sentence with your main point and add the details afterward.
Arrange old ideas before new ideas	Organize old, already known ideas before you introduce your readers to new ideas. It helps sentences logically connect together.
Keep subjects short and simple	Subjects should be short and easy to understand; verbs should appear soon after their subject; long and complex information should come after the verb.
Pair "action" verbs with "doer" subjects	Express your action in verbs, not as nouns; whenever possible use active voice: "somebody (or something) doing x." Subjects can be a person or a study. Passive voice at times is appropriate in STEM writing.

Table 2: Sentence Comparison Using Concepts

Easy or hard to read?	Subject and Verb	Predicate after verb	Why is it easy or hard to read?
Hard	A determination of involvement of lipid-linked chains in the assembly of oligosaccharide *in vivo* **was**	the principal aim of this study.	- Main point buried at the end - Lists new information before the reader is ready - Has long and complex subject - Uses weak verb
Easy	The study's principal aim **focused on**	how lipid-linked chains are involved in the assembly of oligosaccharide *in vivo*.	- Starts with main point - Lists old idea before new ideas - Has short and simple subject - Uses action verb and doer subject

Activity: Editing Sentences

Rewrite each sentence to make it easier to read using the above concepts and self-editing process. Feel free to add or delete words as needed.

1. The store's price increase led to frustration among its customers.
2. High resolution, easy model building, and broad molecular weight range are the benefits of X-ray crystallography.
3. The decision by the dean in regard to the funding of the program by the department is necessary for adequate staff preparation.
4. There are multiple types of RAID (Redundant Arrays of Inexpensive Disks) configurations that could meet the digital storage needs of business customers. A single mirrored copy of all data in a drive is the first configuration known as RAID 1.

    (Sentences 1 and 3 from *Bizup and Williams, p. 44.*)

Answer Key for the Activity

1. When the store increased prices, customers became frustrated.
2. The benefits of X-ray crystallography are its high resolution, easy model building, and broad molecular weight range.
3. The staff can prepare adequately only after the dean decides whether the department will fund the program.
4. Multiple types of RAID (Redundant Arrays of Inexpensive Disks) configurations can meet the digital storage needs of business customers. The first configuration, RAID 1, mirrors a single copy of all data in a drive.

    (Sentences 1 and 3 from *Bizup and Williams, p. 44.*)

Reference

Bizup, Joseph and Joseph Williams. *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace, 12th Edition*. Pearson, 2017.