

Rearrange Sentences To Minimize Interruption

Make the reader's job easier

By Kenneth F. Oettle

We all write e-mails; most of us "text"; and some of us even Twitter®. We write all day, almost every day, and as a consequence, assuming we wish to be as clear as possible, we repeatedly make decisions on how to structure the sentences we are transmitting.

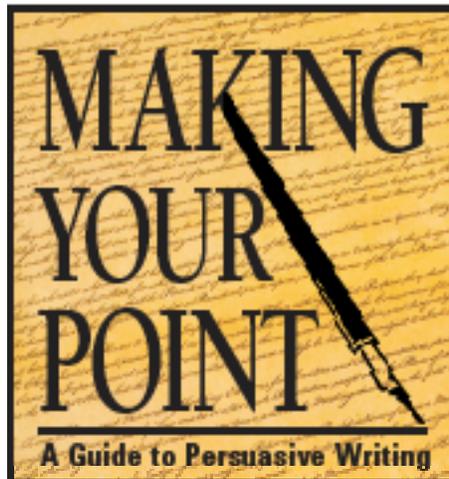
Consider the following example:

The letter amendment dated March 4, 2010, to the petition, asks for supplemental relief.

The sentence is awkward. "To the petition" is interruptive and destroys the flow. It arrives as an afterthought, that is, as information about the amendment coming after the description of the amendment appears complete. (Persons not wishing to "drill down" this way might just say the sentence "has too many commas.")

Both the relationship of the letter to the petition (it's an amendment to it) and the date need to be stated, but one fact has to precede the other. This creates a choice — one of dozens if not hundreds of such choices we make regarding sentence structure every day.

The writer considered the following alternative but didn't like it:



The letter amendment to the petition dated March 4, 2010, asks for supplemental relief.

"Letter amendment to the petition dated March 4, 2010" is likely to be read as describing a petition dated March 4, not a letter amendment dated March 4. The structure does not work.

The writer also thought about adding a comma after "petition" in the hope that the punctuation might cause the reader to associate the date with the letter amendment rather than with the petition:

The letter amendment to the peti-

tion, dated March 4, 2010, asks for supplemental relief.

The idea was that the comma after "petition" would cause the reader to stop and digest the phrase "letter amendment to the petition" before moving on to the date. In a slower world, a comma might be strong enough for that job, but in today's 140-character, 24-7 maelstrom of communication, it isn't. A reader will probably read right through the comma and think the date pertains to the petition, not the letter amendment.

To solve this one, you have to go "outside the box," the box being the idea that both the date and the reference to the petition have to follow "letter amendment." They don't. You can place the date first:

The March 4, 2010 letter amendment to the petition asks for supplemental relief.

This is better. You remove the interruption and reduce the distance between subject ("amendment") and verb ("asks"), making the reader's job easier.

But now you have another issue: whether to place a comma after 2010. Typically, we bracket the year with commas, as in, "The letter amendment dated March 4, 2010, asks for relief." Because this places yet another comma between subject and verb, I don't like it, but it's the convention.

In contrast, if the date serves as an adjective (e.g., The "March 4, 2010 letter

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amendment”), the convention is to place no comma after the year. That I don’t mind.

A Second Example

The rhythm of the following sentence is similar to that of the unedited first example:

This firm responded by letter to the agency on August 18, 2009, on behalf of the Company, setting forth the Company’s position.

The phrase “on behalf of the Company” is interruptive. It feels like something thought of late and thrown in. Though the writer could have organized the sentence better, the disorganization is, at least from a drafting perspective, understandable.

Each piece of information in the sentence is important: (i) who responded — the firm; (ii) the means of response — a letter; (iii) the recipient — the agency; (iv) the date of the letter — August 18, 2009; (v) the party on whose behalf the response was filed — the Company; and (vi) what the letter did — it set forth the Company’s position. The writer cannot be faulted for considering (though he may be faulted for using) any of the following phrasings to open the sentence: (a) This firm responded by letter ..., (b) This firm responded to the agency ..., (c) This firm responded on

August 18, 2009 ..., (d) This firm responded on behalf of the Company ... and (e) This firm set forth the Company’s position....

Each opening is simple and direct, but not all the openings flow comfortably into the rest of the information that has to be conveyed. We know from the example above that “This firm responded by letter” runs into trouble.

The second alternative is workable (“This firm responded to the agency”) if you move “on behalf of the Company” forward:

This firm responded to the agency on behalf of the Company by letter dated August 18, 2009, setting forth the Company’s position.

This has decent flow — no interruptions, merely a tag-on (“setting forth the Company’s position”). I changed “on” to “dated.”

But the tag-on may not be necessary. The concepts of responding to the agency and setting forth the Company’s position cover essentially the same ground. You can eliminate the former by opening with the latter:

This firm set forth the Company’s position by letter to the Agency

dated August 18, 2009.

The phrase “on behalf of the Company” also drops out. If you set forth the Company’s position, implicitly you are responding “on behalf of the Company.”

Sometimes moving phrases around to achieve better flow reveals opportunities to remove duplicative or otherwise unnecessary words. By manipulating the puzzle pieces on one level, you can often address them on another as well.

Puzzler

Which is correct, Version A, Version B, or Version C?

Version A: We need to apprise the client of its legal status.

Version B: We need to apprise the client of its legal status.

Version C: We need to appraise the client of its legal status.

Apprise, from a Middle English word meaning to value or prize, means to value or appreciate. Apprise, from the French word “apprendre,” to learn or tell, means to inform. Appraise, from the Middle English “appraysen,” means to evaluate or set a value on. See *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate® Dictionary* (11th Ed.). Accordingly, you would apprise the client of its legal status. ■