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## To Get to the Point, Get to the Verb

### Avoid the ‘start-stop’ syndrome

By Kenneth F. Oettle

Lawyers write long sentences, which isn't necessarily bad. We write for an intelligent audience that can handle large chunks of information, and we want our prose to seem smooth and sophisticated, not choppy and adolescent.

But the longer the sentence, the tougher the task of organizing it.

Rules of thumb can facilitate this task by eliminating choices. One such rule is to bring the verb as close to the subject as possible so you don't try the reader's patience or let the reader drift. This isn't a matter of grammar; it's a matter of efficiency. Readers generally don't like to wait for the verb.

The common practice of beginning a sentence with a noun followed immediately by an interruptive phrase, set off by one or more commas, violates the guideline that a verb should follow closely upon its noun. The interruption brings an abrupt halt to the story, as in the following example:

The Supreme Court, in *Smith v. Jones*, supra, held that the tort of interference with prospective economic advantage requires a showing of four elements.

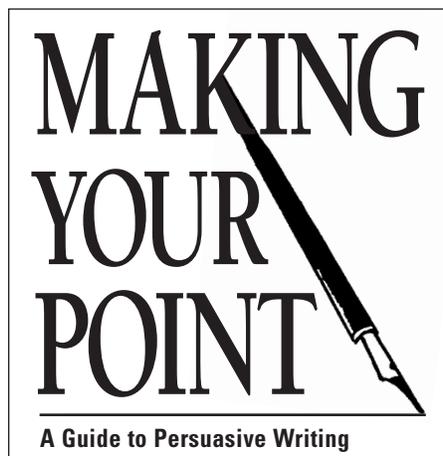
A reader who sees a noun expects a

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verb. In fact, the reader demands a verb because a verb supplies action. Without action, you tell no story. If you tell no story, you frustrate the reader, who may disengage.

A reader who sees a noun allocates a unit of attention, and thus a unit of energy, to receive a verb. When an interruption occurs, the energy is spent on that; a tempo is lost; and the reader



has to “reload” for the substantive message.

Reloading consumes energy, and so does holding the subject in memory (“Supreme Court”) until the verb finally arrives. Thus, the interruption not only frustrates the reader by delaying the action, but it forces the reader to spend extra energy to read your piece.

Such annoyances create suspicion about the validity of your thesis. If your prose is awkward, perhaps your thinking is awkward, too.

Fixing the problem is not difficult. Move the prepositional phrase to the beginning of the sentence (“In *Smith v.*

*Jones...*”), or cite *Smith v. Jones* at the end of the sentence:

**Version A:** In *Smith v. Jones*, the Supreme Court held that the tort of interference with prospective economic advantage requires a showing of four elements.

**Version B:** The Supreme Court has held that the tort of interference with prospective economic advantage requires a showing of four elements. *Smith v. Jones.*

At the beginning of a paragraph, “In” followed by a case name is generally not an effective transition, but this does not preclude your using that structure within paragraphs. Presumably, your paragraph would have an informative topic sentence.

#### A Second Example

Which of the following versions is better, A or B?

**Version A:** The notice provisions in the insurance policy do not require, either expressly or by implication, that the notice letter demand a defense or indemnity.

**Version B:** The notice provisions in the insurance policy do not expressly, or by implication, require that the notice letter demand a defense or indemnity.

Once you say the notice provisions don't do something, the reader wants to know what they don't do. If you delay the verb, the reader may think the notice provisions don't “state” something, or maybe they don't “reveal” or “address” something. Until you supply the verb, the reader can head in any of several directions or may drift, waiting for instructions.

Either way, you aren't in control. You aren't guiding the reader, and when

you aren't guiding the reader, you aren't persuading or laying the groundwork for persuasion. Thus, version A is better because the second half of the verb "do require" is closer to the noun it serves.

In the foregoing example, you reduce uncertainty if you tell the reader before the digressive phrase ("either expressly or by implication") that the notice provisions don't require something. That way, the reader will immediately know what function the notice provisions don't perform (i.e., they don't "require" something). The reader still has to wait to find out what isn't required, but with the verb in hand, the wait is tolerable.

Other examples of the "start-stop" syndrome are as follows:

- The parties, with the assistance of the mediator, ultimately agreed.
- The Court, after full briefing, ruled on the motions.

This is "choppy" prose. What should be a two-part sentence is cut in three. Often, the solution is to move the interruption to the beginning of the sentence, e.g., "After full briefing, the Court ruled on the motions."

### *Puzzler*

How would you tighten and sharpen the following sentence?

Perhaps no statement of the reasons why a society founded on the principles of free enterprise fears the over-concentration of economic power in the hands of a few and does not tolerate allegedly "benevolent" monopolies is better than Judge Learned Hand's.

Get right to it and say "the best

statement" rather than "no statement" so the reader does not have to wait until the end of the sentence to learn your position. Drop "reasons" because it is implicit in the word "why." The phrase "founded on the principles of" can be replaced by "premised on," and "the over-concentration of economic power in the hands of a few" can be dropped because it is implicit in the word "monopolies." "Will not tolerate" seems stronger than "does not tolerate." Finally, the quotation marks around "benevolent" make "allegedly" unnecessary.

The revised version:

Perhaps the best statement why a society premised on free enterprise fears monopolies and will not tolerate them, even if "benevolent," is Judge Learned Hand's. ■