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End Sentences with Your Most Important Thought

The last word delivers the greatest impact

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Every sentence tells a story. It has an actor and action (a noun and a verb), and it makes a point. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The last word in a sentence commands attention because it is the end of a story, albeit a short one.

By reserving your most important fact for the end of the sentence, you create anticipation — dramatic tension. The reader stays interested. Think of the important fact as the climax. If you place it in the middle of the sentence, you resolve the tension prematurely. Then the rest of the sentence is merely denouement. The reader may skip forward, looking for action.

Suppose you wish to call attention to the maximum number of days by which a record date can precede a shareholders' meeting under the State's Business Corporation Law (BCL). Only persons registered as shareholders as of the record date are entitled to vote at the shareholders' meeting. You write:

Section 605 of the BCL provides that the record date must be not more than 60 days before the date of any shareholders' meeting.

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The key fact of 60 days is buried in the middle of the sentence, where it is least likely to be noticed. The message is further clouded by the absence of a reference point prior to the first mention of 60 days. The reader has to make a mental note of the number of days, read further to answer the question "60 days before what?" and then go back and



plug in "60 days."

You can improve the sentence as follows:

Section 605 of the BCL provides that a record date may precede a shareholders' meeting by no more than 60 days.

In its position of prominence at the end of the sentence, the key fact makes a greater impact and is more likely to be remembered. The relevant period (60 days) now follows rather than precedes the reference point (the shareholders' meeting), creating a logical sequence:

First one learns the reference point, then the distance to it.

A Second Example

Suppose you represent a manufacturer whose supplier precipitously and unjustifiably terminated its delivery of materials under a requirements contract. As a consequence, the manufacturer was unable to supply its retailers; the retailers turned to other sources; and the manufacturer lost business.

You contend that the damage to the manufacturer's business was so severe that recovery will take a long time. Which version is best in support of this point, A, B or C?

Version A: ABC Corp.'s business will take years to regenerate with its retailers.

Version B: ABC Corp.'s business with its retailers will take years to regenerate.

Version C: Regenerating ABC Corp.'s business with its retailers will take years.

Version A is the worst option because it buries the concept of a long recovery in the middle of the sentence and then trails off.

Version B is better than Version A because it places "years" closer to the position of prominence at the end of the sentence, and it ends the sentence with the other important concept — regeneration.

To decide between Version B and Version C, ask which concept is more important — regeneration or the passage of time. You want to show the severity of the damage, so the more important concept is the passage of time, i.e., “years.” Version C is better for your purposes because the most important fact — that recovery will take a long time — ends the sentence.

The beginning of a sentence is also prominent but less so than the end. Version C is better than Version B for the additional reason that it begins with the powerful concept of regeneration. The manufacturer’s business has been disfigured, like a starfish that has lost an arm, and it must “regenerate.”

One More Example

Which is a more emphatic statement of Mr. Big’s demand for control, Version A or Version B?

Version A: Mr. Big insists upon control in all his ventures.

Version B: In all his ventures, Mr. Big insists upon control.

The point of the sentence is that Mr. Big must have control. The word that embodies the point — control — stands out better if placed at the end of the sentence, as in Version B.

Puzzler

How would you tighten and sharpen the following sentence?

Because the Agency does not have a set of procurement regulations in place, procedures for handling bid protests must be derived from general principles inherent in the common law.

Substitute the shorter and more

forceful “has no” for “does not have.” Delete “a set of,” “in place,” “handling” and “general principles inherent” as implicit. Eliminate a prepositional phrase by using “protest” to modify “procedures.” Arguably, you don’t need “bid” because it will be implicit in context. With “bid” gone, the alliteration of “procurement” and “protest procedures” is tighter.

Say the Agency “lacks” procurement regulations if you wish to suggest that the Agency was remiss in failing to adopt them.

The new version: Because the Agency has no procurement regulations, protest procedures must be derived from the common law.

Alternate version: Because the Agency lacks procurement regulations, protest procedures must be derived from the common law. ■