



The Writing Center

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO

DENVER | ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS

Reader Expectations: Writing Sentences That Work for Readers

Readers have fixed expectations of where to look in the structure of every discourse unit – from a sentence to a paragraph to an entire essay – for specific types of substance. For example, most stories don't wait until the end to introduce the main character. In scientific writing, it's not appropriate to place the Results of an empirical study in the Introduction. Placing information where readers expect to find it increases the likelihood of messages being understood and helps prevent misinterpretation.

Below are 5 tips for writing sentences that work for readers:

- 1. Place the person or thing whose "story" a sentence is telling at the beginning of the sentence, in the Topic Position**
 - Use subjects to name the characters in your "story"
 - Begin sentences constituting a passage with consistent topics/subjects
- 2. Follow a grammatical subject as soon as possible with its verb**
 - Avoid long introductory phrases and clauses
 - Avoid long abstract subjects
 - Avoid interrupting the subject-verb connection
- 3. Articulate the action of every clause or sentence in its verb**
 - Beware too many To Be verbs (is/are...)
- 4. Place appropriate old information – known material already stated in the discourse – in the Topic Position**
 - Provide context for readers before asking them to consider anything new
 - This information should link backward to the previous sentence
- 5. Place new information – words you want readers to emphasize – at the ends of sentences, in the Stress Position**
 - Push new, complex units of information to the ends of sentences
 - This information should lean forward to the next sentence