But deciding to use a passive verb will also cost you—you will have to use more words than with an active verb, and you will lose some of the vigorous movement that an active verb would bring. In such a case, however, the coherence of the passage would probably count for more, and you would choose the passive verb.

One of the keys to skilled writing is making such decisions so that you consistently gain more than you lose. I hope that this book will help you do so.

CHAPTER

2

Identifying Topics and Comments in Sentences

In rhetoric, the flexibility of English sentences contributes in a major way to the elegance and readability of discourse.

—Frederick Bowers,
"Meaning and Sentence Structure"

If alternatives exist, then they serve different purposes.

—Frank Smith, *Writing and the Writer*

One can see certain analogies in this kind of brain specialization between the special ways that tools are used and sentences are constructed. With tools, the left hand develops a holding grip while the right develops various precision grips—it "does something to" what is held in the left hand. A propositional sentence contains a topic (usually the grammatical subject) and a comment (usually the grammatical predicate), which does something to or tells something about the topic. . . . In a discourse, the topic is often "held over"—our imagery suggests the analogy with handedness.

—Dwight Bolinger and Donald A. Sears,
Aspects of Language, Third Edition

. . . words at the beginning [of sentences] are long and loud, partly to cue beginningness, but also to convey information about what's to come; and what's not to.

—Harvey B. Sarles, *Language and Human Nature*

To write is to affirm at the very least the superiority of this *order over* that *order.*

—Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, First Edition

To begin working toward clarity and coherence, please imagine the following scene with me: My colleague Jim, who is using his new graphite racquet, begins our weekly racquetball match by hitting the ball so hard that he cracks the ball in half.

Now suppose that in some context I must describe Jim's action in one written sentence. I would have many different sentence forms to choose from. Each of these would convey essentially the same information as the others. But each would package that information in a slightly different way. In other words, each sentence would present the same action from a slightly different perspective.

For example, I could choose from at least the following forms:

Jim cracked the ball with his new graphite racquet.
The ball was cracked by Jim with his new graphite racquet.
As for the ball, Jim cracked it with his new graphite racquet.
As for his new graphite racquet, Jim used it to crack the ball.
The ball Jim cracked with his new graphite racquet.
His new graphite racquet Jim used to crack the ball.
What Jim did was to crack the ball with his new graphite racquet.
What Jim cracked with his new graphite racquet was the ball.
What Jim used to crack the ball was his new graphite racquet.
The one who cracked the ball with his new graphite racquet is Jim.
The thing that Jim cracked with his new graphite racquet was the ball.
The thing that Jim used to crack the ball was his new graphite racquet.

It was Jim who cracked the ball with his new graphite racquet.
It was the ball that Jim cracked with his new graphite racquet.
It was his new graphite racquet that Jim used to crack the ball.

By now you have probably anticipated my question: How should I decide which one of these forms to use? Some people might answer by noting that some of these forms appear far less often in print than others do, and that therefore they should not be selected. Other people would argue that the shortest form is the best. But neither response helps us choose among forms that are equal in length and frequency.

Of course, in the strictest sense, I have presented an impossible challenge here. To be able to answer the question fully, one would have to know a great deal about the situation in which I would be writing: why I am writing; for whom I am writing; what those people know about Jim, me, and racquetball; and what they most likely need to know about us and our racquetball matches in order for me to achieve my purpose.

But even without full knowledge of purpose and audience, it is possible to begin to say pertinent things about which of the forms I should use in a particular place in an essay.

One could do so by considering the forms in the light of what I will call "aboutness." That is, even though all the forms describe the same activity, many are messages about different things. They hold up different things for readers to learn about. They focus on different things.

For example, even without knowing much about the situation in which *Jim cracked the ball with his new graphite racquet* is used, most people would say that it is a message about Jim. Most would say that *The ball was cracked by Jim with his new graphite racquet* is a message about the ball. And most would say that *What Jim did was to crack the ball with his new graphite racquet* is a message about what Jim did.

SENTENCE TOPICS

I will call the part of a sentence that tells what the sentence is about the *topic*. In each sentence, something is topicalized. In the three sentences that we just looked at, *Jim*, *The ball*, and *What Jim did* are the topics, respectively.

To expand a little on this definition, I would add that the topic of a sentence is its center of attention or its focal point. The topic of a sentence shows what perspective on events or actions its writer is taking.

For instance, *Jim cracked the ball with his new graphite racquet* reveals a writer treating an action by focusing on Jim. On the other hand, *The ball was cracked by Jim with his new graphite racquet* reveals a writer treating the same action but by focusing on the ball.

It is impossible to predict where the topics of all sentences will appear. But in most sentences of well-written prose, the topic appears early. It is usually the first noun or noun phrase. And it is often identical to what traditional grammar calls the subject and its modifiers. The subject of a sentence is generally the element or elements with which the verb agrees in person and number. In *Jim cracked the ball with his new graphite racquet*, *Jim* is the subject; it is also the topic.

The correspondence between subject and topic does not hold in all sentences. For example, consider especially the third of the following sentences:

> For our trip to Glacier National Park, Steve bought new boots and a new rucksack. The boots he wore every day. The rucksack he never took out of the van.

In the third sentence, *The rucksack* is the topic. This sentence is a message about the rucksack. And here *The rucksack* is the direct object of the sentence, not its subject.

The correspondence between subject and topic does not hold in other sentence forms. For example, in a sentence made up of two clauses, the first of which gives the source of the information conveyed in the second (*He said that the comet struck the satellite*), the subject of the main clause is *He*. But we would miss an important characteristic of messages if we were to say that this sentence is about the person to whom *He* refers. This sentence is basically a message about *the comet*; thus here, too, the subject and the topic are not identical.

We are now nearly ready to begin answering the question that I posed earlier. We could begin deciding which sentence form to use in an essay by learning what perspective on the action in the racquetball court that it requires, by deciding what the essay is about. Then we could choose the form or forms that focus on the racquetball incident in the way appropriate to the essay.

For example, if Jim has been the consistent focus in the essay, I should select a form that has *Jim* as its topic. I should avoid a form that has as its topic *the ball* or *his graphite racquet*. That would throw the essay out of focus.

SENTENCE COMMENTS

But there is more to the answer. The topic indicates what the sentence is a message about. But the sentence also conveys information about the topic. The elements in a sentence that say something about the topic I will call the *comment*. Generally, these elements correspond to the complete predicate. If a sentence were read aloud, the main emphasis would usually fall within the comment.

For instance, in *The ball was cracked by Jim with his new graphite racquet*, the topic is *The ball*, and the comment includes everything after it. In *Jim cracked the ball with his new graphite racquet*, on the other hand, *Jim* is the topic, and *cracked the ball with his new graphite racquet* is the comment.

TESTS TO DISTINGUISH TOPICS FROM COMMENTS

I have indicated that the topic of a sentence usually appears early in it and corresponds to the subject. I have also noted that the comment usually appears later, corresponds to the full predicate, and includes the main emphasis of a sentence. These are helpful general descriptions, but they are not the most precise. There are other methods, though, that can help distinguish topics from comments in many sentences.

The Question-Test

One of these is the question-test. It involves imagining what question the sentence we are concerned with could be thought of as providing an answer to.

For example, consider the following sentences:

> John is one of my really close friends.
> He teaches in a suburban high school.

Imagine that we have to determine what the topic and comment of the second sentence are. We could start by imagining what question this sentence would be a logical response to. The key to this is coming up with a verb that is more general than the one in the sentence (*teaches*).

The question that I would formulate is, "What does John do?" To this, *He teaches in a suburban high school* seems to be a very logical response. Next we have to determine what is referred to in both the imagined question and the response. That is the topic of the response. In this case John is referred to in both. Thus *He*, which replaces John in the response, is the topic of that sentence.

Now we must return to the question. We pick out from it the interrogative element (*What*) and the verb (*does do*). If we put these together to make another (admittedly rough-sounding) question, we get *What does do*? The words from the response that answer this question or provide a more specific correspondence to it (*teaches in a suburban high school*) make up the comment of that sentence.

The question-test also works well for sentences such as *The rucksack he never took out of the van*. Recall that this sentence appeared earlier in the following context:

> For our trip to Glacier National Park, Steve bought new boots and a new rucksack. The boots he wore every day. The rucksack he never took out of the van.

Imagine reading only the first two of these sentences and then stopping. What question would be on your mind? Probably something like "OK, I know about the boots. But what happened to the rucksack?" *The rucksack he never took out of the van* is an appropriate answer to that question.

The element that is common to both the question and the answer is *rucksack*. It, therefore, is the topic of the sentence being considered. The answer to "What happened?" is *he never took (it) out of the van*. These elements make up the comment.

The Challenge-Test

The second method of distinguishing topics from comments is the lie-test or challenge-test. It involves determining what part of a sentence readers would probably not call a lie or challenge. That part

is the topic. Readers pay excellent attention to it, but they do so to become oriented to what the sentence is about. They do not usually ask whether it is true. This test also involves determining what part of a sentence readers would consider calling a lie or challenging. That part is the comment.

For instance, look again at two sentences that we examined earlier:

> John is one of my really close friends.
>
> He teaches in a suburban high school.

Imagine that we have to decide what the topic and comment of the second sentence are without using the question-test.

We can start by asking whether readers would likely consider challenging the *He*. No. They would not be inclined to read the second sentence and respond by saying, "No, it's not John, it's Vern," or "That's a lie; Vern does." Therefore, we can classify *He* as the topic of this sentence.

On the other hand, once readers finish this sentence, they might be inclined to challenge all that appears after *He*. It is possible to imagine readers saying, "That's not what he does. He administers the local community college." All that appears after *He*, then, is the comment.

Try the challenge-test with another sentence that we looked at earlier: *The rucksack he never took out of the van*. When readers encounter this sentence, they would not be likely to say, "No, that's not true; it was the water bottle that he never took out of the van."

However, they might be inclined to say, "No, that's not true; he took it out at least once, that time we stopped in West Glacier." If they did respond in this way, they would be challenging information conveyed in the comment.

Exercise One

Decide what the topic and comment of each of the following sentences are. Especially since these sentences can make up a short paragraph, you probably can make sound decisions about topics and comments. Practice several methods of determining topics and comments: Look for the

correspondence between topics and subjects, comments and predicates; use the question-test; and use the challenge test.

1. Commencement Day began with a breakfast for the graduates, their guests, and some faculty members.
2. The graduates and their guests seemed to be in a very festive mood.
3. As for the faculty members, they seemed to feel a little out of place.
4. Most of the formal ceremonies were handled by the president of the senior class.
5. It was he who gave a very moving tribute to the college.
6. That tribute he gave with some slight quavering in his voice.
7. What he tried to make clear was how much his teachers had helped him move toward true discernment.
8. After the tribute, the podium was turned over to an officer of the alumni association.
9. What he said both shocked and irritated the graduates.
10. In essence, his request was for them to start sending financial contributions to the college.

Exercise Two

A few summers ago my son Jonathan, while fishing, caught a large rock bass on a bare hook. Try to describe that action in one sentence. But in different sentences, you should topicalize different things.

For example, if you were asked to topicalize Jonathan, you should write *Jonathan caught a large rock bass with a bare hook.*

1. Topicalize *a large rock bass.*
2. Topicalize *a bare hook.*

Now describe the same activity, but do so by completing sentences that begin as follows:

3. As for that large rock bass,
4. The one who caught
5. As for Jonathan,
6. What Jonathan did
7. That rock bass
8. It was a rock bass that
9. It was Jonathan who

TOPICS AND COMMENTS IN SENTENCES WITH MORE THAN ONE CLAUSE

When we move from sentences composed of one independent clause to those made up of several clauses, some of which may be dependent clauses, the situation with topics and comments becomes more complicated.

It is only slightly more complicated with compound sentences. Each independent clause has its own topic and comment. For example, consider *I went to the store, but I did not find the spices.* In the first clause, *I* is the topic and *went to the store* is the comment. In the second clause, *I* is the topic and *did not find the spices* is the comment.

With sentences that contain a dependent clause, we could get very technical since in the strictest sense each dependent clause has its own topic and comment. But such an analysis is probably more complicated than we need.

Therefore, I will treat dependent clauses in the following manner. If a noun clause serves as the subject of a sentence, it will probably be the topic for that sentence, e.g., *That we asked for an extension* (topic) *surprised them* (comment). If the noun clause appears after the verb—as a direct object, indirect object, objective complement, object of a preposition, or in apposition to a noun—it will probably be part of the comment: *We* (topic) *should give the books to whoever wants them* (comment).

Adjective clauses usually modify nouns or pronouns. If the word that an adjective clause modifies is part of the topic of a sentence, the adjective clause will also be part of the topic, e.g., *The boy who sailed beyond the end of the pier* (topic) *looked weak* (comment). On the other hand, if the word that the adjective clause modifies is part of the comment, the adjective clause will also be part of the comment, e.g., *She* (topic) *wrote the only book that is used in all law schools* (comment).

Finally, if an adverbial clause precedes an independent clause, we sense that on one level it serves as the topic while the whole main clause serves as a comment. But because this analysis is more delicate than we need for writing instruction, I will treat the adverbial as introducing the main clause: *Since the dune was long and steep* (introductory adverbial), *he* (topic) *decided to wait at the bottom* (comment). If an adverbial clause follows the main-clause subject of a sentence, I will treat it as part of the comment: *The large sailboat*

(topic), *although it was not leaking very badly, had to be towed to port* (comment). And I will treat an adverbial clause that concludes a sentence as part of the comment, e.g., *He* (topic) *swam to shore, although he had cramps in both of his calves* (comment).

SENTENCE TOPICS AND ETHICS, PART I

Readers apparently accept the topic of a sentence as something beyond challenging, and—if they are inclined to challenge something—challenge the comment. Once writers realize this, they must beware of writing in ways that verge on or fall into the realm of the unethical. By including information in their sentence topics that could or should be challenged, they can trick their readers into accepting it. They might very well not be able to get readers to accept the same information if they were to express it in a sentence comment.

For example, a shrewd and somewhat unscrupulous car dealer probably would not say the following about a car: "I also have this car for sale. It is peppy and yet very fuel efficient." If the dealer were to do so, he or she would be expressing the claim that the car is peppy and yet very fuel efficient in a sentence comment, where it might invite challenges.

Instead, the dealer would probably say something like, "This peppy and very fuel-efficient car is also for sale." Do you see—or maybe even feel—the difference? In this sentence, the dealer treats the information about the pep and fuel efficiency of the car as undeniable. And prospective buyers might be tricked into accepting that information. What does the dealer treat as deniable? That he or she has this car for sale, something that is so obvious that no one would consider challenging it.

Similarly, can you imagine a politician claiming that "My extremist and short-sighted opponent has appeared on television twice in the last week"? I can. What is she or he doing? Smuggling the claims centering on *extremist* and *short-sighted* into the sentence topic, where hearers will be likely to accept them, and including in the comment information that no one would be likely to challenge.

Once you know about such potential seductions, you should be better prepared to cope with some advertisements. Some of them go beyond anything we have examined so far because they do not even include comments. We see or hear topics, sometimes fairly complex

topics. We encounter clusters of words such as *fresh, sparkling, refreshing wine coolers*, not *These wine coolers are fresh, sparkling, and refreshing*. Or we read about *a special limited-time offer* (not *This offer is special and runs for a limited time*), or about a *thirty-day, no-risk, free trial* (not *This trial is for thirty days, carries no risk, and is free*).

Also operating here, of course, is our tendency not to question adjectives that appear before nouns, but to question those adjectives if they appear after verbs, where they call attention to themselves because they seem to be close to the point of the sentence. We tend to accept modifiers if they are simply attached to something that we know exists (*This exquisite purity*). We might question the same modifier if it were predicated about that which we know exists (*This purity is exquisite*).

Exercise Three

Below are some statements that could conceivably appear in political or advertising campaigns. Some of these include in their topics information that might not belong there. Others of them do little or no such smuggling. Decide which ones you think smuggle information into topics, tell what information is being smuggled, and estimate how serious you think each case of smuggling is.

For example, the sentence *My degenerate opponent will not represent you well* smuggles *degenerate* into its topic. Without further evidence, or if this is untrue, this would be a serious misuse of language.

1. Sensational clothing bargains are available at Primarily Pants each day until midnight.
2. This lawnmower starts with just one pull, runs smoothly, and gives your lawn a smooth, clean cut.
3. Our best model is on sale through Memorial Day for a drastically reduced price.
4. Jules Alexander: for a better tomorrow.
5. Today's deluxe filters—all the pleasure of cigarette taste with absolutely no tar.
6. The governor pays far too little attention to the well-being of this side of the state.
7. My opponent and his backward-looking supporters are proposing that we decrease taxes.

8. Invisible braces for a new you.
9. World-class skis at the lowest prices anywhere.
10. What our state desperately needs is more jobs.

TO REVIEW: A FUNCTIONAL VIEW OF SENTENCES

What we have begun to develop is a functional view of sentences. As messages, sentences consist of two parts.

One of these, the topic, the writer holds up before readers as if to say, "Consider this. It's what I'm going to communicate to you about." The necessity of having topics for sentences is obvious. We always have trouble when we are not sure what someone is writing or talking about. Thus we often hear people in conversations saying things like, "Pardon me. Who's this about? What's this about?"

Moreover, since topics usually appear early in sentences, they keep readers from wondering or being uneasy for very long. And since skilled writers normally use topics to hold up before their readers things that the readers often know something about or can recognize, topics help make communication efficient. They connect what readers need or want to learn to what they already know.

The other part of the sentence, the comment, adds the information about the topic. In using comments, writers say, "Here's what I want you to know about the topic I've called to your attention."

When we view sentences in this way, we realize that they reveal what perspectives writers are taking on things; we realize how writers have decided to package information about the world. Writers can write about one event or action in several different ways. They can select different focal points (topics) and different things to convey about these focal points (comments).

As we will see later, if writers make these selections wisely, it is probably because they keep in mind what they are trying to accomplish with their essays, what sets of focal points they have established up to certain points in their essays, what their readers already know about given subjects, and what these readers still need to learn about the subjects. As you make informed decisions about sentence topics and comments, you should develop more control over your style, more power in your prose, and more joy in using the resources of written language appropriately.

FURTHER READING

Readers who wish to investigate some of the experimental and theoretical research underlying this chapter may wish to consult the following works. I have kept the number of entries to a minimum; these are the works I would recommend that others start with.

Bolinger, D. (1980). *Language—The Loaded Weapon*. London and New York: Longman.

Firbas, J. (1982). "Has Every Sentence a Theme and a Rheme?" In J. Anderson (Ed.), *Language Form and Linguistic Variation* (pp. 97–115). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Firbas, J. (1986). "On the Dynamics of Written Communication in the Light of the Theory of Functional Sentence Perspective." In C. R. Cooper & S. Greenbaum (Eds.), *Studying Writing: Linguistic Approaches* (pp. 40–71). Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1967). "Notes on Transitivity and Theme in English, Part Two," *Journal of Linguistics*, 3, 199–244.

Kuno, S. (1972). "Functional Sentence Perspective: A Case Study from Japanese and English," *Linguistic Inquiry*, 3, 269–320.

Van Dijk, Teun A. (1977). "Topic, Comment, Focus, and Their Functions in Discourse," *Text and Context: Explorations in the Semantics and Pragmatics of Discourse*. London: Longman.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Vande Kopple, William.
Clear and coherent prose : a functional approach / William Vande Kopple.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 0-673-39779-3
1. English language—Rhetoric. I. Title.
PE1408.V38 1989
808'.042—dc19 88-15506
CIP

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 — KPF — 94 93 92 91 90 89

Printed in the United States of America

For Wanda