

Old Information before New Information

The order of information in a sentence affects the reader's understanding. By placing old information before new information, a writer makes clear points to his or her reader. In terms of logic and organization, a reader can better understand a new point if it is connected to an older point he or she already knows.

You can view this type of organization as a chain. Each link in a chain must connect to both the link before it and the link after it. Making a chain linguistically, or with words, requires the writer to connect old information (the last link) with new information (the next link). All sentences should logically and chronologically follow the preceding sentence and should obey the following two rules.

1. Sentences should begin with information introduced to the reader. Consider beginning a sentence with words or phrases from the preceding sentence.
2. Sentences should end with new information that is unfamiliar to the reader. This new information can then become the beginning of the next sentence.

In some cases, sentences must be constructed in the passive voice to follow the "old before new" rule. The passive voice occurs when the subject is being acted upon. When the subject is the doer of the action, the sentence is written in the active voice.

Passive Voice: Coffee was poured into the cup.

(In this sentence, the coffee—the subject of the sentence—is being acted upon.)

Active Voice: The barista poured coffee into the cup.

(In this sentence, the barista—the subject of the sentence—is doing the action.)

Read the following paragraphs. Though both present the same information, does one paragraph flow better than the other?

Paragraph 1: Every Tuesday, Samantha *takes* her dog to the dog park near her house. The city of San José *maintains* the dog park in an effort to promote healthy lifestyles. The city of San José *sustains* several dog parks throughout the city.

Paragraph 2: Every Tuesday, Samantha *takes* her dog to the dog park near her house. The dog park *is maintained* by the city of San José in an effort to promote healthy lifestyles. The city of San José *sustains* several dog parks throughout the city.

Although it uses the passive voice, the second paragraph presents the information more clearly and coherently than the first paragraph. By beginning the second sentence with "the dog park," the writer is providing the reader with familiar information before introducing new information (that San José maintains the dog park). Moreover, the second sentence of paragraph one neither links to the preceding point nor flows into the follow sentence.

Activity 1

Decide if the following statements are true or false.

1. ____ You can use passive voice to enhance the cohesion of a paragraph.
2. ____ It is better to put new information at the beginning of a sentence.
3. ____ Old information belongs at the end of a sentence because it is boring.
4. ____ I should only use passive voice in my essays.
5. ____ The "old before new" principle is used to enhance the logical flow of a paragraph.

Activity 2

Read the following two paragraphs and answer the subsequent questions.

Paragraph 1: Shelby spends her Friday nights at Pete's Candy Store. The store is owned by Pete Peppermint. Pete Peppermint opened the store in 1964 and based his candies off his grandmother's recipes.

Paragraph 2: Shelby spends her Friday nights at Pete's Candy Store. Pete Peppermint owns the store. Pete Peppermint opened the store in 1964 and based his candies off his grandmother's recipes.

Which of the paragraphs above follows the "old before new" stylistic principle? Which example makes a better sequence of sentences? Why? Be sure to support your answers with evidence from this handout.

Answer Key for Activity 1

1. true
2. false
3. false
4. false
5. true

Answer Key for Activity 2

The first paragraph is more logical because it provides old information before new information.