

Achieving Flow in Your Writing

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Does it flow?

That is probably the question writers ask readers most frequently about their writing. Obviously, flow—the smooth progression from one sentence to another—is a desirable quality in writing. But how to achieve it?

One effective way to achieve flow in your writing is to apply a quite simple principle: *begin sentences with old information*. What does that mean? Let's consider an example. Here are two passages; they both say the same thing. But does one flow better than the other? The example is from *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, by Joseph M. Williams.

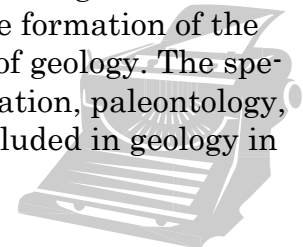
1a. Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble creates a black hole.

1b. Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble.

Most readers feel that 1b “flows” better than 1a? Why? Because the second sentence in 1b begins with a term—*black hole*—that we encountered in the first sentence. In other words, it begins with old information. As Joseph Williams explains in *Style*, “We feel one sentence is cohesive with the next when we see at the beginning of a second sentence information that appeared toward the end of the previous one. That’s what creates our experience of ‘flow.’”

The importance of placing old information at the beginning of your sentences becomes even greater in the case of extended passages, especially passages that contain long sentences. When succeeding sentences fail to begin with old information, the passage can seem confused, incoherent, even disorganized. Consider this passage.

The three areas studied are oceanography, geophysics, and geology. Geophysical theory and methods to investigate the oceans and lands beneath them are central to oceanography; the study of the earth, using the basic principles of physics, is the concern of geophysics; and the formation of the earth, its composition, history, and changes, is the focus of geology. The specialties of mineralogy, petrology, stratigraphy, sedimentation, paleontology, structural geology (tectonics), and geomorphology are included in geology in this study.



Few readers would feel that that passage flows. (The disruption of flow probably is most drastic in the last sentence.) To see why, examine the information that begins each succeeding sentence. You will see that not one sentence begins with old information, that is, information that appears toward the end of a preceding sentence. Here is the passage revised so that old information appears at the beginning of each sentence.

The three areas studied are oceanography, geophysics, and geology. Oceanography relies heavily on geophysical theory and methods to investigate the oceans and lands beneath them; geophysics is the study of the earth, using the basic principles of physics; and geology focuses on the formation of the earth, its composition, history, and changes. In this study, geology includes the specialities of mineralogy, petrology, stratigraphy, sedimentation, paleontology, structural geology (tectonics), and geomorphology.

The revised passage is actually what the author wrote; it appears in a 1991 article in the *American Economic Review*. Most readers would consider it to flow just fine. No doubt that is because of its felicitous placement of old information.

