

Emphasizing Main Points

A Handout from the EcoTeach Center, Duke University
Prepared by Paul Dudenhefer, Writing Tutor



As a writer, you always want your main ideas to come across clearly to your readers. The question is, How do you do that? How can you construct prose so that your readers are likely to notice your main points?

The only surefire ways to do that are to stand over your reader's shoulder and point out to her your main ideas, or to underline or italicize in your paper every important point you wish your reader to notice. Alas, as writers, we cannot do that. In the first instance, it would be impossible for you to be present every time a reader reads your writing; in the second case, the conventions of the printed text preclude it.

So what to do? It will help to understand that, in general, the greatest place of emphasis in a sentence is at the end. (The second greatest place is at the beginning. But the beginning of sentences is best left for old or linking information.) Therefore, in any given sentence, you should usually put at the end the one piece of information that is most important, that most deserves stress or emphasis.

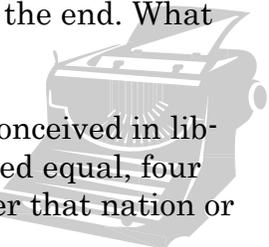
Skeptical? Consider this example. Most of us are familiar with Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Here are the opening sentences from that short speech.

Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

This speech is a widely celebrated piece of American rhetoric. Why is it so powerful? One reason is that Lincoln knew how to use sentence structure to achieve emphasis. Just take the first sentence. What phrase or idea comes at the end? *That all men are created equal*. Most would agree that of all the elements in that sentence, that is the one that is most important.

To demonstrate further the wisdom of putting important ideas at the ends of sentences, let's revise Lincoln's text by putting different things at the end. What happens to the effectiveness of the speech?

Our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, four score and seven years ago. A great civil war, testing whether that nation or



any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure, now engages us. A great battlefield of that war is our meeting place today. That field is a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live, and we are here to dedicate it. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this, we all no doubt believe.



Most readers will feel that the speech loses a lot of its power. Why? In large part because the sentences end with anticlimactic or lesser ideas.

This principle (putting important ideas at the ends of sentences) is most relevant in the case of long sentences. Here are two versions of the same long sentence. Which version is the best?

1a. As a vegetarian, Paul is similar to Nancy, the difference being that Paul eats dairy products, vegetables, fruits, grains, and nuts, while Nancy eats dairy products, eggs, vegetables, fruits, grains, and nuts.

1b. As a vegetarian, Paul is similar to Nancy, the difference being that Paul eats dairy products, vegetables, fruits, grains, and nuts, while Nancy eats not only dairy products, vegetables, fruits, grains, and nuts, but also eggs.

Most people would agree that 1b is better. Why? Because the most important piece of information, the one thing that distinguishes the two kinds of vegetarians—the fact that one eats eggs and the other doesn’t—appears at the very end of 1b and is thus more likely to be noticed and emphasized.

Let’s end with one more example, a familiar one, from the world of political conventions. How are votes for nominees announced on the floor of the Democratic or Republican convention? Answer: with the most important piece of information, the nominee’s name, at the end! “The great state of North Carolina, home of the Great Smoky Mountains and the Outer Banks, home of the world-famous Duke University, home of the greatest rivalry in college sports, the rivalry between Duke and UNC, home of the best barbecue, bar none, in the United States, and home of the celebrated Research Triangle Park, which itself is home to over twenty-five national companies, including three Fortune 500 companies, is proud to cast its vote for a man who will bring honor and integrity to the Oval Office, a man who has already served his country in exemplary fashion as a member of our armed forces and as a representative in the U.S. Congress, ladies and gentleman, a man who will be the next president of the United States, . . . !”

For more on using the ends of sentences as places of emphasis, see *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, by Joseph M. Williams, or *Expectations: Teaching Writing from the Reader’s Perspective*, by George D. Gopen.

