

Giving Shape to Your Prose

A Handout from the EcoTeach Center, Duke University
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Read the following paragraph, which is the opening paragraph in a recently published economics article.

Recent theoretical analyses of international differences in growth rates have focused attention on the role of human capital. Most cross-country empirical studies of long-run economic growth now include some proxy for human capital, and these are invariably significant. Data limitations have, however, forced severe compromises. Paralleling analyses of wage determination, empirical implementation virtually always employs some readily available measure of the quantity of formal schooling to reflect human capital, but this appears inadequate. The analysis of international differences in growth rates here suggests that math and science skill is a primary component of human capital relevant for the labor force. Such cognitive skill of a population is not well proxied by measures of school quantities or measures of resources devoted to schools. Accounting for differences in labor-force quality significantly improves our ability to explain growth rates.

How does the writing strike you? Is it transparent and easy to follow? Is it dense and difficult? Does the paragraph seem especially well-constructed?

For me, this paragraph gave me trouble when I first read it. Why was that? One problem with this paragraph, for me, is it has no meaningful shape. My suspicion is that the writer's choices were by and large arbitrary. If you were to ask him, for instance, why he began the first two sentences as he did, and why he chose to place the term *human capital* at the end of the first sentence and in the middle of the second, and why he made the first sentence a simple sentence and the second a compound sentence, he would likely have no compelling reason.

When I say the paragraph has, for me, no meaningful shape, what do I mean by that? For one, the construction of its successive sentences is such that the paragraph does not focus on a limited set of concepts. In other words, in the paragraph here, each sentence begins with a different concept. Let's list them:

Recent theoretical analyses of international differences in growth rates . . .

Most cross-country empirical studies of long-run economic growth . . .

Data limitations . . .

Paralleling analyses of wage determination, empirical implementation . . .

The analysis of international differences in growth rates . . .

Such cognitive skill of a population . . .

Accounting for differences in labor-force quality . . .



With each sentence, my attention is shifted to a different concept. For that reason I found this paragraph difficult to comprehend.

I submit that this paragraph would be improved if it were revised so that its sentences began with a small number of concepts. Doing so would begin to give the prose a meaningful shape. The question becomes, Which concepts to use? Well, that really depends on “whose story” the author wishes to tell.

One clue to an answer is to study the paragraph and see which concepts are repeated throughout. I identify at least three: *analyses/studies*, *economic growth/growth rates*, and *human capital*. Let’s suppose we picked one of them—let’s pick *human capital*—and revised the paragraph so that *human capital* appeared at the beginning of most or all of the sentences. Would the paragraph have a more meaningful shape? Here is one possibility:

Human capital has been the focus of recent theoretical and empirical analyses of international differences in growth rates. In the empirical analyses, **human capital** has usually been represented by some readily available measure of the quantity of formal schooling. But this appears inadequate. Here, **human capital** is measured in a different and, we hope, more profitable way: as the math and science skill of a given population. **Math and science skill** is not well proxied by measures of resources devoted to schools. Moreover, **such cognitive skill** is relevant for the labor force—which gets us back to analyzing differences in growth rates. As we show here, **human capital**, when measured by math and science skill, enables us to account for differences in labor-force quality, which in turn significantly improves our ability to explain growth rates.

I would submit that this version of the paragraph has more shape—and, I would believe, is easier to follow and understand. The reason is simple: In the revised paragraph, all of the sentences begin with one of two concepts: *human capital*, and *math and science skill*. This paragraph now tells a coherent story: that of human capital and math and science skill.

Now, have I distorted the author’s meaning? Perhaps; perhaps not: I have no way of really knowing, short of asking him. But I would suspect that the revised version of the paragraph achieves a level of “meaningfulness” that the original does not.

Another virtue of the revised paragraph is that all of its grammatical subjects are short: *human capital*, *math and science skill*, *such cognitive skill*. By having short grammatical subjects, the sentence gets past the subject to the verb quickly, and that makes prose easier to read.

How can you use this example to help you write better? Try this. When you construct a paragraph or extended passage, ask yourself this question: Which concept or concepts do I want to emphasize? That is, what is the paragraph or passage *about*? Once you determine that, construct your sentences so that that concept appears at the beginning of most or all of the sentences. By doing so, you will produce writing that has a meaningful shape and that is easier to read.