

## Chapter Twelve

### Improving your style

**Grammar focus.** Passives and other focus structures

#### Introduction.

Have you ever wondered why fairy tales start with *Once upon a time there was a little girl...* rather than simply *A little girl...*? Or why once you mention something, you refer to it later with a pronoun, as in *Mary bought me a donut and I ate it* rather than *Mary bought me a donut and I ate the donut*? Have you ever thought about why in conversation our sentences usually start with pronouns? These are reflections of two important principles that govern how we place information in our sentences, the principles of **end weight** and **end focus**. End weight says that English speakers prefer to have more words after the verb than before it. Thus *I saw him at the market* is preferred to *At the market I saw him*. End focus says that we prefer to have old or background information before the new and prefer that the new information come after the verb. Thus *There's a bug in my soup* is preferred over *A bug is in my soup* since *a* indicates that the word *bug* represents new information so it should come after the verb. To see how these two principles work, let's test your intuitions in a couple of awareness activities.

#### **Awareness Activity 12.1. End focus in advertisements**

The following pairs of sentences are based on actual sentences from advertisements. One of them is the actual sentence, the other a reworded

version. Which one do you think was the one that the advertiser thought would be most effective? Is that effectiveness based on end weight or end focus?

1. a. Just one G.I. Joe is now and forever.  
b. Now and forever there is just one G. I. Joe.
2. a. This spacious grill is yet another Char-Broil masterpiece.  
b. Yet another Char-Broil masterpiece is this spacious grill.
3. a. Ordering, installation and service, EVERYTHING NuVision handles.  
b. NuVision handles EVERYTHING: ordering, installation and service.
4. a. In different ways to different people the opportunity to build your own business can be rewarding  
b. The opportunity to build your own business can be rewarding in different ways to different people.
5. a. Every minute, every day, world news is happening here.  
b. World news is happening here every minute, every day.

Did you choose the following? 1. b, 2. a, 3.b, 4. b, 5 a. Let's take a look at each to see how the principles of end focus and end weight applied. I've italicized the version that was in the advertisement.

1. a. Just one G.I. Joe is now and forever.  
b. *Now and forever there is just one G. I. Joe.*

The words *just one* indicates that G.I. Joe is the focus. By moving the adverbs *now and forever* to the first of the sentence and moving the subject *just one G.I. Joe* to the end and replacing it in the subject position with the word *there*, we

may not have end weight (i.e. more words after the verb than before), but we do have effective end focus.

2. a. *This spacious grill is yet another Char-Broil masterpiece.*

b. Yet another Char-Broil masterpiece is this spacious grill.

Notice that the word *another* with its built-in indefinite article *an* indicates that the following noun is the new information. The word *this* indicates that the following word is old information that the reader already knows about, perhaps by looking at the accompanying picture. Thus the first version has the old and new information in the appropriate parts of the sentence.

3. a. Ordering, installation and service, EVERYTHING NuVision handles.

b. *NuVision handles EVERYTHING: ordering, installation and service.*

*EVERYTHING* is capitalized to indicate that it is the focus, perhaps imitating the emphasis that might be given to the word if the sentence were spoken. In the second version, the emphasized word is not only after the verb but the examples of *everything* follow. Thus both the principles of end weight and end focus are in play.

4. a. In different ways to different people the opportunity to build your own business can be rewarding

b. *The opportunity to build your own business can be rewarding in different ways to different people.*

Having the sentence end in the adjective *rewarding*, as in alternative a, would be effective if that were the focus. However, the advertiser probably wants to draw

attention to the *different ways* and *different people*, using both end weight and end focus.

5. a. *Every minute, every day, world news is happening here.*

b. *World news is happening here every minute, every day.*

Notice how the advertiser draws attention to the place (*here*) by using end focus.

The second choice would draw attention to the place and the time (*every minute, every day*) by placing them at the end of the sentence for both end focus and end weight. However, the advertiser wanted to focus on the place, in this case the news channel.

### **Awareness Activity 12.2. Old and new in discourse.**

The following paragraphs were taken from articles in a popular national magazine. As you read each one, mark where the new information is located in each sentence and note what grammatical signals the authors used to indicate which information is new and which is old. I have numbered the sentences to aid in the discussion.

a. (1) John's father had been quite resourceful. (2) He and John made a go-cart together out of wood and metal scraps. (3) Next they made a boat motor out of found objects. (4) His father's passion and skills wore off on John. (5) As a teenager, he built a car. (6) Later he became a machinist.

b. (1) The chain of recovery begins with the victims. (2) They must learn to recognize the warning symptoms. (3) The symptoms accompanying these

mini-strokes last only a few minutes, (4) but these minutes are crucial for survival.

Starting with passage a, let's take a closer look at what you probably noticed.

I have italicized the focus or new information in each sentence.

(1.) John's father had been *quite resourceful*.

The new information is in the focus position at the end of the sentence.

(2.) He and John made *a go-cart together out of wood and metal scraps*.

The focus position at the end of the sentence gives examples of the resourcefulness, the new information. Notice the use of *a* with *a go-cart* to denote new information.

(3.) Next they made *a boat motor out of found objects*.

This follows the same pattern as sentence 2.

(4) His father's passion and skills wore off on *John*.

The notion of resourcefulness, now the old information, is at the beginning of the sentence (reworded as *His father's passions and skills* for sentence variety.)

*John* is in the focus position at the end of the sentence

(5.) As a teenager, he built *a car*.

John is now the old information and is at the beginning of the sentence as the pronoun *he*. The new information is at the end of the sentence. Note again the *a* signaling the new information. Note too that a time element (*as a teenager*) is placed at the beginning as the background information rather than at the end (he build a car as a teenager.) so as not to hide the new information.

(6.) Later he became *a machinist*.

Again the new information is at the end introduced by *a*. At the beginning are a background adverbial (*later*) and old information (*he*).

Let's take a look now at how the same use of end focus works in the other passage

(1) The chain of recovery begins *with the victims*.

The focus information is at the end.

(2) They must learn to recognize *the warning symptoms*.

The focus information of sentence 1 is repeated as the old information at the beginning of the sentence as the pronoun *they*. The new focus is at the end.

(3) The symptoms accompanying these mini-strokes last *only a few minutes*.

The focus information of sentence 2 (*the symptoms*) is now the old information so it is given first. The new focus information (*only a few minutes*) is at the end.

(4) but these minutes are *crucial for survival*.

The focus information for 3 is now the old information at the beginning of 4 with the new information in the focus position at the end.

The principles of using end focus and end weight come no naturally that we do not realize that other languages have other patterns. You will find these two principles very useful when helping English language learners improve their writing.

### Awareness Activity 12.3. Street talk versus written language.

Read the following pairs of sentences. Which one are you more likely to encounter in informal spoken rather than written English?

1. a. The terrorists got captured not long after the bombing.  
b. The terrorists were captured not long after the bombing.
2. a. Not long after you called, he started home to see his wife.  
b. He started home to see his wife not long after you called.
3. a. They raise Minneola tangelos near Orlando.  
b. Minneola tangelos are raised near Orlando.
4. a. Kosovo [stressed] is the topic of discussion today.  
b. Today the topic of discussion is Kosovo.

Did you choose 1.a, 2.b, 3.a, and 4.a as the versions most likely to appear in conversation? Let's look a second at why. Sentence 1.a uses what is called the **get passive**, a conversational alternative to the **be passive** found in the written English as illustrated in 1.b. Sentence 2.b illustrates how conversational English emphasizes end weight. Written English pays more attention to end focus by bringing background information, as might be expressed in adverbials of time (*not long after you called*), to the beginning of the sentence. Sentence 3.a demonstrates the use of the indefinite *they* as a substitute for the passive in conversational language. Notice how *they* is indefinite since it does not refer to any specific people. Sentence 3.b illustrates

the be-passive found in written English. Sentence 4.a shows how spoken English often uses stress for information focus instead of making changes in word order to promote end focus, as is done in 4.b.

### **Grammar.**

Let's look at how these two principles of end weight and end focus manifest themselves in the grammatical patterns that we use in our speaking and in our writing.

**Focus Stress.** We already looked at focus stress in our chapter on what grammar sounds like. Return to Chapter Two and review how grammatical stress and focus stress interact to bring new information to the attention of the listener.

**Pronouns.** In Chapters Nine and Eleven we looked at reference chains. We saw that once we have named an object or other item of conversation, we tend to replace the original noun with a pronoun so as not to repeat the old information. This use of pronouns allows the new information to be more prominent. For example, compare: *The cake tastes good because Taka made it.* with *The cake tastes good because Taka made the cake.* Notice how using the pronoun for the second *the cake* helps the new information *Taka* stand out.

**Nonreferential there.** Sometimes the subject of the sentence is the new information, as evidenced by the use of the indefinite article *a*. A common way in conversation to move this new information so it appears after the verb is to place a *there* at the beginning of the sentence and reversing the order of the subject and the verb. This is sometimes called a **nonreferential there** since it does not

refer to a location. We saw this in the *There's a bug in my soup* example in the introduction. In Chapter Four when we looked at verb agreement, we saw the effect that nonreferential *there* is having on verb agreement rules. Though it appears in the subject position in the sentence and is followed by the verb, technically it isn't the subject. The real subject is after the verb so subject verb agreement should be based on the nouns following the verb, unusual for English sentences. Thus we should say *There are four reasons to do that*. However, as we saw in our discussion of the evolving standards of the English language, the contraction *there's* is now in *common* usage in conversation with the verb agreement based on what seems to be a singular *there* in the subject position.

- There's a cow in the yard.
- There's a couple of men outside wanting to talk to you. (proper English: There are...)
- There's several things I'd like to talk to you about. (proper English: There are...)

Although some form of the verb *be* is most commonly used with nonreferential *there*, it can occur with other verbs such as the following:

- verbs of motion or direction: *come, go, walk, run, fly*. (*Suddenly there flew a bird out of the bottle.*)
- event verbs that describe something happening: *develop, arise, appear, emerge, ensue, happen*. (*Out on the housetop there arose such a clatter.*)

- verbs of existence or position: *exist, live, dwell, stand, lie, remain*.  
(*There once stood a gas station on this corner.*)

The use of nonreferential *there* with these other verb is more common in story telling and literature than in ordinary conversation.

**Passives.** Another way to move the subject to the focus position after the verb is to create a passive. Passives may be created with transitive action verbs in an SVO sentence by reversing the order of the agent subject and the object, in essence creating an OVS sentence. Since English speakers expect the actor or agent causing the action of the verb to happen to be in the S position, the listener or reader has to be signaled that a change has been made. Let's see how that is done using variations of the sentence *The dog ate my homework* as an example. These are the rules of thumb.

1. Place the preposition *by* before the S and reverse the order of the S and the O,

*The dog ate my homework* → *My homework ate by my dog*

*The dog has eaten my homework* → *My homework has eaten by my dog.*

*My dog is eating my homework* → *My homework is eating by my dog*

2. Place the auxiliary verb *be* before the main verb of the sentence and have it take on the tense or aspect of the verb.

*My homework ate by my dog → My homework was eat by my dog.*

*My homework has eaten by my dog → My homework has been eat by my dog*

*My homework is eating by my dog → My homework is being eat by my dog.*

3. Change the verb to its past participle form (-en or -ed)

*My homework was eat by my dog → My homework was eaten by my dog.*

*My homework has been eat by my dog → My homework has been eaten by my dog*

*My homework is being eat by my dog → My homework is being eaten by my dog.*

Try the same with the following sentences to see how it works with other tenses and aspects:

- My dog had eaten my homework.
- My dog has been eating my homework.
- My dog will eat my homework.

Did you get the following results?

- My homework had been eaten by my dog.
- My homework has been being eaten by my dog.
- My homework will be eaten by my dog.

Thus our expectancy grammar tells us to expect that whatever is in the S position to be the doer of the action. However, if we hear or see a form of *be* followed by a past participle, S did not do the action. The action happened to S. In other words, it is a passive.

#### **Adverb Movement.**

Sometimes end weight and end focus conflict with each other, especially in writing. Since old information tends to be at the beginning of the sentence and is often expressed by a pronoun, a series of sentences in a composition may all start with the same pronoun. The result is a lack of sentence variety. The new information may actually be hidden in the end of the sentence among the various adverbials telling when, where, or why the event occurred. This may not be noticed in conversation with its use of grammatical and focus stress, but it is a problem in writing. An easy way to solve the problem is to move adverbials that give background information to the beginning of the sentence. Just be careful that the sentence does not become too front heavy. End weight with few exceptions should still predominate.

Note the effect of moving the adverbials in the following pairs:

- Version A. He loved to eat boiled eggs out straight out of the shell in the morning for breakfast.

Version B. In the morning for breakfast, he loved to eat boiled eggs straight out of the shell.

- Version A. She canned the peaches that she picked yesterday in the morning.

Version B. In the morning she canned the peaches that she picked yesterday.

See how the second version allows the focus information to be at the expected location at the end of the sentence?

One exception to the principle of balancing adverb movement with end weight is when the verb is the information focus. Compare the following two versions of the same sentence and notice how the second one is a better sentence if we want to focus on the arrival of the ambulances even though the principle of end weight is not followed.

- The ambulance arrived after several long minutes of serving around stalled cars in the crowded streets of the city.
- After several long minutes of swerving around stalled cars in the crowded streets of the city, the ambulances arrived.

Long sentences that end in a verb for the sake of information focus are called **periodic sentences**. Sparingly used, they can be an effective rhetorical device.

### **Pragmatics and Discourse.**

We have already seen that some of the above grammatical devices for focusing information, such as adverb movement and passives, are more common in the written language rather than conversation. However, the passive deserves more attention since its use and its form change depending on when it is used.

**Passives in conversation.** Passives are infrequent in conversational English. In fact they are so infrequent, children until second or third grade have trouble processing the version that uses the verb *be* as an auxiliary to mark the passive. Conversational English prefers other alternatives. One is the **get passive** that was mentioned in Chapter Four. To see how it is formed, compare the following *be*-passives with their *get* alternatives.

- Be-passive: My cat was hit by a car.

Get passive: My cat got hit by a car.

- Be passive: My buddy was shot by the police.

Get passive: My buddy got shot by the police.

Descriptive studies indicate that about half the passives in conversation, especially among children, are of this type. They also indicate that the *by* phrase is usually omitted in passives, occurring less than 10 percent of the time, usually to focus the attention on who did the action. Usually the passive is used because who did the action is unknown or unimportant. Notice how this works in the following.

- They got arrested.
- The pizzas have been ordered already.
- I got accepted by UF

However, passives with either *be* or *get* are uncommon in conversation. A common substitute for the passive is to use an **indefinite you** or **indefinite they** as the person doing the action. Notice in the following example that *you*, the listener, are not expected to do the action, as you can tell by the use of the pronoun *you* rather than *I* in the answer.

- Question: How do you make cheese?

Answer: First you put the milk in a bucket and add....

Notice the indefinite use of *you* and *they* in the following.

- How do they raise oranges in a swamp like that?
- You really have to be careful

The use of indefinite *you* and *they* is so common in conversation that composition teachers have to remind their students not to use *personal*

pronouns (*you, they*) in their writing unless they actually refer to the reader or to actual people.

**Passives in fiction.** Passives seldom occur in fiction. In fact, students in fiction writing classes are often penalized if they use passives. We saw in Chapter Ten that verbs play an important part in fiction by creating a picture in the mind of the reader. Action verbs in the active rather than the passive voice do a better job of connecting actions with the actors in the narrative.

**Passives in the news and academic writing.** The *be*-passive is common in the news and in academic writing since the doer of the action is often unimportant or unknown. It is especially useful for purposes of focus. Notice how the passive is used in this paragraph from a news article about a woman symphony conductor. I have placed all the main verbs and their auxiliaries in italics and the passives in bold.

And then the Baltimore Symphony *came* calling. Alsop ***was seen*** as new blood and a new direction: she's only 48, young for a conductor at this level. She's funny and approachable—she *has* a habit of chatting informally to audiences from the podium—and she ***has been known*** to moonlight (on the violin) with a swing band. She *can handle* the warhorses of the repertoire—she just *recorded* Brahms' *Symphony No. 1* with the London Philharmonic—but she also *champions* living American composers like Philip Glass. She ***can even be heard***, on occasion, to utter the phrase *way cool*.

In this one paragraph the author used ten main verbs, three of which were passive. This passage was taken from the middle of the article. The paragraphs before and after talk about Alsop's qualities. Since Alsop is the old or given information, she is mentioned at the first of each sentence so the new information can be at the end. As you can see by looking at what follows the passives that are marked in bold, this placement of old and new information could only be done by frequently using a passive. Notice that since who did the action that expressed in the passive is unknown, immaterial, or unimportant, no *by* phrase is given.

### **Reflections.**

#### **Some concepts.**

- English speakers expect to hear the new information towards the end of the sentence. This principle is called end focus.
- English speakers expect more words after the verb than before. This principle is called end weight.
- We can improve our writing style through various discourse-based rules which promote end focus.

<b>Rules of thumb.</b> Forming the passive in academic writing
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Place the object noun in the subject position. (<i>The car is repairing.</i>)</li> <li>2. Place a <i>be</i> before the main verb and transfer the appropriate markings for tense and aspect from the main verb to the <i>be</i>. (<i>The car is being repair.</i>)</li> <li>3. Change the main verb to the –ed/-en form. (<i>The car is being repaired</i>)</li> </ol>

4. If the logical subject is the focus information, place it in a *by* phrase after the verb in the O position. (*The car is being repaired by some neighborhood kids.*) If the logical subject is old information or is unknown or unimportant, delete it and do not use a *by* phrase. (*The car is being repaired.*)

### Some key terminology.

- **adverb movement**—for the sake of sentence variety in academic writing and to allow the new information to be in the focus position at the end of the sentence, adverbs and adverbials that are giving background information, such as time or conditions, are brought from the end of the sentence to the beginning before the S position. (*Before the decision can be made, we need to know what happened yesterday.* In this case the new focus information is *what happened yesterday* rather than *before the decision can be made* )
- **be passive**— In the passive, the subject of the sentence is not performing the action. Instead the action is happening to the subject. In Standard English the passive is marked in the verb by using *be* as the auxiliary followed by the –ed/-en form of the verb (*My cell phone was stolen.*)
- **end focus**—a principle of information flow that says that new information should be after the verb towards the end of the sentence. (*I want a new car.*)
- **end weight**—a principle that says that there should be more words after the verb than before.

- **get passive**—In the passive, the subject of the sentence is not performing the action. Instead the action is happening to the subject. In conversation this is often marked in the verb by using *get* rather than *be* as the auxiliary followed by the *-ed/-en* form of the verb. (*My cell phone got stolen.*)
- **impersonal they or you**—In conversation, the passive is infrequent. Instead, the active is used with an impersonal *they* or *you*, which do not refer to anyone in the chain of reference, in the S position. Thus the *they* or *you* serve as the doers of the action though they don't refer to any specific people. (*They stole my cell phone. How do you steal a cell phone?*)
- **nonreferential there**—One grammatical device that can be used to place an indefinite subject (one with *a/an*) after the verb in order to promote end focus is to replace it with a *there* that does not refer to a location, and thus is nonreferential, and to invert the subject and the verb. (*There's a cow outside. There appeared a bright light in the sky.*) .
- **periodic sentence**—a longer sentence with preposed adverbials that ends with a verb in the focus position. An effective rhetorical device when used sparingly. (*After all the hubbub in the lunchroom, the principle resigned.*)

### Some Reflective Activities.

1. What went wrong? What rule of thumb was broken in the following sentences?
  - \*John killed in the war. (i.e. He died.)
  - \*The window was broke with a rock.

- What's that outside? \*?A gator is in the pool.
- \*A new car he wants.
- \*?Because we were having so much fun, he came.

2. Academic passives. Change the following sentences from conversational English to their academic or journalistic English equivalents.

- His scheduled got messed up by the computer.
- This is how you make salt.
- They arrested the bank robbers last night.

3. Identifying passives. Which of the following sentences from a news article are passives?

- The nuclear age was wrapped in paradox.
- The images of Hiroshima seared the consciousness of generations.
- The cold war turned into a long pause.
- All we saw was a bright light.
- It is intolerable for states such as Korea to get nuclear weapons
- The threat of war has been with us since then.
- Another treaty was signed three years ago.
- Russia's nuclear weapons haven't been under tight control.
- They could be transported by a single person.

4. End focus. Explain how the principles of end focus have been used to manage the flow of information in the following sentence from a newsmagazine.

“It’s a game, as you’ll see. I am a prisoner of the Iraqi government, but that government was appointed by the Americans.”

5. Self evaluation. Take one of the papers you submitted to a class this semester or last. Take one page and analyze it for information flow. Have you used the principles of end weight and end focus effectively? What improvement could you make?

### **Grammar detective 12. Focus in advertisements**

For your last grammar detective, let’s see how advertisers use focus as part of their selling pitch.

#### **Instructions:**

1. Look through full page advertisements in a magazine and notice how the advertisers use the principles of end weight and end focus to sell their product. For example, in an ad for eyeglasses a homely girl with glasses is looking at the reader. The first line of the text is written in large letters, the following two lines are in slightly smaller type. :

**30 DAYS TO LOVE**

**YOUR NEW GLASSES.**

**HAPPINESS GUARANTEED.**

The first sentence “30 days to love your new glasses” is divided so that end focus is on love. The last word of the block of words is “guaranteed.” When this is combined with the picture of the homely girl, how is that for a powerful message? The name of the product

is in the lower right corner in a box that can't be missed. Again, end focus.

2. Find 5 advertisements and do a similar analysis of how those who prepared the copy used visuals and the principles of end weight and end focus to make their product more attractive
3. Write a brief one page report of your findings and be prepared to turn in your report with a copy of the ads.
4. In class be prepared to share the advertisement you found most interesting. What implications can you see for English teachers?

### **Teaching Ideas.**

1. **Finding passives.** Passives are most common in journalism and in academic reading. Clip out a recent article from a news magazine, make copies for the class, and have the class work together in teams, each assigned to a different section or paragraph, to find the passives. Have them discuss with each other how they know that they have found passive rather than active verbs. Then have the groups share their results with the class.
2. **End focus.** Find a selection of nonfiction and make a copy of one page. Select a longer paragraph and as a class look one sentence at a time at how the author has used such things as pronominalization, adverb movement, passives, and the like to manage the flow of information using the principles of end weight and end focus.

3. **Who did it?** Make a list of famous people and a randomized list of one of their accomplishments (e.g. Einstein Theory of Relativity, Andrew Lloyd Weber *Jesus Christ Superstar*). Ask the question “What did they do?” and point to individuals on the famous people list. The students match the person with the accomplishment and say an active sentence. (e.g. *Andrew Lloyd Weber wrote Jesus Christ Superstar.*) Then point to items on the accomplishment list and ask “Who was responsible for this?” The students answer with the appropriate passive. (e.g. *The Theory of Relativity was proposed by Einstein.*) Notice that since the item pointed to is now the old information, it appears at the beginning of the answer with the person responsible placed at the end by using a passive with a *by* phrase..