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## Improving Cohesion: The “Known/New Contract”

### Introduction

Have you ever read a paragraph that’s difficult to process, even though you understand all the words? The problem may be that the paragraph lacks *cohesion*—a quality that allows readers to see how ideas connect from one sentence to another.

Especially when readers are learning about new concepts or processes, readers comprehend ideas most easily when familiar (“known”) information is located at the beginning of sentences, and unfamiliar (“new”) information is located toward the end of sentences.

At the beginning of a sentence, readers expect to

- Learn what the sentence is about
- Connect the sentence to what they’ve already read.
- Find “known” or familiar information.

Toward the end of a sentence, readers

- Expect to see new and important ideas and info
- Focus most of their attention and effort

Readers may have difficulty processing ideas when writers locate new information at the beginnings of sentences.

### To Create Cohesion in Your Writing, Follow these Guidelines for the Known/New Contract

- At the beginning of a sentence, put “known” information: ideas that you have already mentioned or concepts you can reasonably assume your reader is already familiar with.
- At the end of a sentence, put the newest, most unfamiliar information. This is often the information you want to emphasize and perhaps expand on in your next sentence.

### Compare

Which of these short paragraphs is easier to read and comprehend?

- 1) Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists exploring the nature of black holes in space. The collapse of a dead star into a very small point creates a black hole. So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in profoundly puzzling ways.
- 2) Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists exploring the nature of black holes in space. A black hole is created when a dead star collapses into a very small point. So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in profoundly puzzling ways.

If you are like many readers, you probably found the second paragraph somewhat easier to read and understand. This is because the first paragraph did not fully implement the known/new contract. The section below provides a detailed explanation.

## Explanation and Analysis

The first example above has been copied below, with topics at the beginnings of sentences put in boldface, and information at the ends of sentences underlined.

### *Paragraph 1 from page 1*

**Some astonishing questions** about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists exploring the nature of black holes in space. **The collapse of a dead star into a very small point** creates a black hole. **So much matter compressed into so little volume** changes the fabric of space around it in profoundly puzzling ways.

### *Analysis of the paragraph's information flow*

- Sentence 1 begins with a concept the reader is likely to be familiar with (questions), and it ends with a new concept (black holes). Good.
- But sentence 2 begins with another new concept (the collapse of a dead star), and it ends with a concept that has already been introduced (a black hole). Thus the ideas in sentences 1 and 2 are difficult to connect.
- Sentence 3 is back on track: it begins with an idea that has already been mentioned (a lot of matter compressed into little volume), and it ends with new information (the fabric of space around the black hole).

Revising sentence 2 to present “known” information at the beginning and new information at the end makes the paragraph easier to read and understand, as you can see from the revision on p. 1.

## Practice

1. Circle the topic at the beginning of each sentence below, and underline the information that comes at the end.
2. Revise the paragraph to honor the “known/new contract,” putting familiar information at the beginning of sentences, and new information at the end.

Quantitative research uses numbers in collecting and interpreting data. Experimental studies and quantitative descriptive studies are the two primary methods of quantitative research. Five basic concepts are fundamental to quantitative research methodology: reliability, validity, randomization, probability and the null hypothesis. Scholars grant credibility and importance to the results of a quantitative research project on the basis of the qualities of reliability and validity. To rule out rival hypothesis (alternative explanations) and control threats to reliability and validity, randomization is an important strategy in good study design. When readers interpret the results of an experiment, probability plays an important role.

**Revision of the practice sample:** Research that uses numbers in collecting and interpreting data is quantitative research. Two primary methods of quantitative research are experimental studies and quantitative descriptive studies. Both of these quantitative research methods rely on five basic concepts: reliability, validity, randomization, probability and the null hypothesis. Reliability and validity are qualities that affect how scholars grant credibility and importance to the results of a quantitative research project. Randomization is an important strategy in good study design, allowing researchers to rule out rival hypotheses and control threats to reliability and validity. Probability plays an important role as readers interpret the results of an experiment.

Information and examples on this handout were drawn from Carnegie Mellon's Global Communication Center resources and Joseph Williams *Style: Ten Lessons on Clarity and Grace*, University of Chicago Press, 1995.