

Conflicting Clarity Principles

Purposes: To revise sentences based on an understanding of the structures that readers perceive as clear; to “produce clear, coherent prose,” an objective for all WR courses

Applying the Principles of Clarity to your sentences isn’t always straightforward. Sometimes, you’ll need to make choices between different principles. Here are two principles that can conflict with each other.

“Simplicity before complexity”: The principle “simplicity before complexity” directs the writer to revise to put the subject-verb pair as near the beginning of the sentence as possible. That means, you should revise, reduce, relocate or remove wordy, drawn-out introductory phrases, and long phrases separating the subject from its verb.

“Old before new”: According to this principle, the writer should order a sentence according to “old before new,” or familiar information before unfamiliar. That means that sentences flow together better if they are linked to words or ideas in the previous sentences.

1. These two examples violate the “simplicity before complexity” principle. Revise them by applying the “simplicity before complexity” principle.

- a. *Drawn-out introductory phrase:* “The most beloved child of everyone in her village, especially her grandmother, Little Red Riding Hood entered the woods.”
- b. *Long phrase separating subject and verb:* “Little Red Riding Hood, the most beloved child of everyone in her village, especially her grandmother, entered the woods.”

2. Now revise them by applying the “old before new” principle.

3. Reflect: Which do you find clearer? Why?

Revision notes:

Applying “Simplicity before Clarity”: If we ask “WHO is doing WHAT?”, we would say that Little Red is entering the woods, of course. We might also notice that the adjective “beloved” is a nominalization that has the verb “to love” in it, and we might decide that the villagers and the grandmother are also main characters, and loving is their action. That would lead us to revise like this: “Little Red Riding Hood entered the woods. Everyone in her village loved her, especially her grandmother.”

Applying Old before New: Following this principle, here’s another revision: “Little Red Riding Hood entered the woods. She was the most beloved child of everyone in her village, especially her grandmother.” Even though this sentence uses a “to be” verb and has more words than the first revision, readers may prefer it because both sentences begin with the same character.