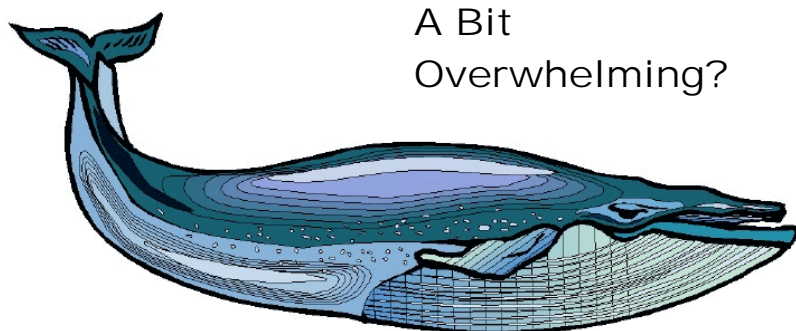


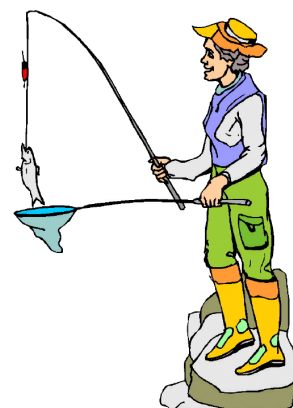
HOW TO FIX A SENTENCE



A Bit
Overwhelming?



Or Nicely
Manageable?



Contents

Short Sentences	2
Sub-Paragraphs	4
Bloated Boa Constrictors	6
Marathons	8
"However" Opportunities	9
Top-Heavy Sentences	10
Relative-Clause Opportunities	12
"Therefore" Opportunities	15

SHORT SENTENCES

Short sentences are easy to read and hard to misunderstand.

Long sentences are hard to read and easy to misunderstand, even if they are grammatically perfect. They offer ample opportunity for misreading what subject goes with what verb or what adjective modifies what noun.

Here is an example of a long sentence similar to one I edited recently.*

In our dealings with the provinces, we have relaxed our negotiating position in exchange for offsetting rigor through principles requiring a consensus approach, in cases of serious risk only, as well as considerations of costs and benefits, recognition of the provisional nature of the decision and the importance of review and follow-up, along with the important element of transparency.

In editing this, I found it hard to break the sentence into its two major components. I wasn't sure whether the first major component of the sentence was this:

In our dealings with the provinces, we have relaxed our negotiating position in exchange for . . .

or this:

In our dealings with the provinces, we have relaxed our negotiating position in exchange for offsetting rigor through . . .

Similarly, I found the second major part of the sentence hard to figure out. I wasn't sure which parts were attached to which other part or parts. I then spoke

* I have modified the sentence to protect confidentiality.

with the author and sent him my interpretation of what it meant. The following is not the exact form of what I sent, but it conveys the meaning:

In our dealings with the provinces, we have relaxed our negotiating position in exchange for three elements. The first is offsetting rigor through principles requiring a consensus approach, in cases of serious risk only. The second is consideration of costs and benefits. The third is recognition of the provisional nature of the decision and the importance of review and follow-up, along with the important element of transparency.

The author replied that I had misread the sentence. Here's what it turned out to mean:

In our dealings with the provinces, we have relaxed our negotiating position in exchange for offsetting rigor through principles requiring three elements. The first is a consensus approach, in cases of serious risk only. The second is consideration of costs and benefits. The third is recognition of the provisional nature of the decision and the importance of review and follow-up, along with the important element of transparency.

SUB-PARAGRAPHS

Did you find it hard to plow through that example on long sentences? It wouldn't be surprising if you did. Let's take another approach to the problem.

Here's the original sentence again:

In our dealings with the provinces, we have relaxed our negotiating position in exchange for offsetting rigor through principles requiring a consensus approach, in cases of serious risk only, as well as considerations of costs and benefits, recognition of the provisional nature of the decision and the importance of review and follow-up, along with the important element of transparency.

And here is the exact form of what I sent to the author for comment (but without the underlining used here):

In our dealings with the provinces, we have relaxed our negotiating position in exchange for:

- offsetting rigor through principles requiring a consensus approach, in cases of serious risk only;
- consideration of costs and benefits; and
- recognition of:
 - the provisional nature of the decision;
 - the importance of review and follow-up; and
 - the important element of transparency.

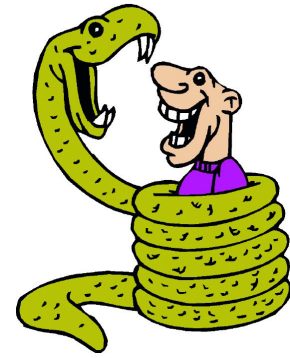
The author saw in an instant that I had misread the original. Here's the way it should have read:

In our dealings with the provinces, we have relaxed our negotiating position in exchange for offsetting rigor through principles requiring:

- a consensus approach, in cases of serious risk only;
- consideration of costs and benefits; and
- recognition of:
 - the provisional nature of the decision;
 - the importance of review and follow-up; and
 - the important element of transparency.

Note how quickly you can read and understand the two examples above. Do not hesitate to use sub-paragraphs in memos and briefing notes. They are not elegant, but they do a big favour for both you and your readers. Acts and regulations use this technique extensively to avoid confusion.

BLOATED BOA CONSTRICTORS



Some sentences appear to have swallowed another complete sentence that is stuck right in the middle. They resemble a boa constrictor that has just swallowed a pig whole.

Here is an example.

Hard to Read:

On March 15, 2000, our new policy package, including amendments to existing legislation, introduction of new legislation, funding for priority areas, particularly research and development, and establishment of a new unit to foster industry partnerships, will be released to stakeholders for comment.

Better:

On March 15, 2000, our new policy package — including amendments to existing legislation, introduction of new legislation, funding for priority areas, particularly research and development, and establishment of a new unit to foster industry partnerships — will be released to stakeholders for comment.

Better Still:

On March 15, 2000, our new policy package will be released to stakeholders for comment. The package includes amendments to existing legislation, introduction of new legislation, funding for priority areas, particularly research and development, and establishment of a new unit to foster industry partnerships.

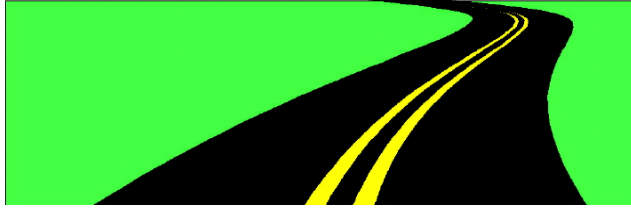
Best:

On March 15, 2000, our new policy package will be released to stakeholders for comment. The package includes:

- amendments to existing legislation;
- introduction of new legislation;
- funding for priority areas, particularly research and development;
- and
- establishment of a new unit to foster industry partnerships.

MARATHONS

Some sentences go on forever, seemingly with no end in sight. There's always a way to break them into shorter sentences.



Here is an example.

Hard to Read:

Issues you could address at the conference include Canada's commitment to sustainable development through emissions reduction in the widget sector and the development of quality standards for widget manufacturing in order to tap new export markets.

Better:

One issue you could address at the conference is Canada's commitment to sustainable development through emissions reduction in the widget sector. Another issue is the development of quality standards for widget manufacturing in order to tap new export markets.

Best:

Issues you could address at the conference include:

- Canada's commitment to sustainable development through emissions reduction in the widget sector; and
- the development of quality standards for widget manufacturing in order to tap new export markets.

“HOWEVER” OPPORTUNITIES

Hard to Read:

While some environmental non-government organizations favour taxation and regulatory methods to control greenhouse gas emissions, the Government has decided to use voluntary partnerships to elicit co-operation from industry, institutions and the public.

Better:

Some environmental non-government organizations favour taxation and regulatory methods to control greenhouse gas emissions. However, the Government has decided to use voluntary partnerships to elicit co-operation from industry, institutions and the public.

TOP-HEAVY SENTENCES

Some sentences have a great long subject sitting on top of a tiny predicate. The reader is kept hanging on and hanging on, without knowing what's going on until the last few words of the sentence.

Here's an example:

Hard to Read:

On June 30, 1992, our proposal to consolidate responsibility and resources for widget management by forming a new regulatory agency to be called Widgets Canada was endorsed by Environment Canada.

Better:

On June 30, 1992, Environment Canada endorsed our proposal to consolidate responsibility and resources for widget management by forming a new regulatory agency to be called Widgets Canada.

Best:

On June 30, 1992, Environment Canada endorsed our proposal to form a new regulatory agency to be called Widgets Canada. This agency would consolidate responsibility and resources for widget management.

I said elsewhere that [active verbs](#) are more effective than passive verbs. Here's an exception. To fix the following top-heavy sentence, I've changed the active verb "will attend" to the passive "will be attended by".

Hard to Read:

The Honourable Anne McLellan, Minister of Justice, the Honourable Paul Martin, Minister of Finance, the Honourable Allan Rock, Minister of Health, the Honourable John Manley, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Honourable Brian Tobin, Minister of Industry, will attend the meeting.

Better:

The meeting will be attended by Honourable Anne McLellan, Minister of Justice, the Honourable Paul Martin, Minister of Finance, the Honourable Allan Rock, Minister of Health, the Honourable John Manley, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Honourable Brian Tobin, Minister of Industry.

Best:

The meeting will be attended by:

- the Honourable Anne McLellan, Minister of Justice;
- the Honourable Paul Martin, Minister of Finance;
- the Honourable Allan Rock, Minister of Health;
- the Honourable John Manley, Minister of Foreign Affairs; and
- the Honourable Brian Tobin, Minister of Industry.

or:

The ministers affected will attend the meeting.

Note that the last option makes a content change, not a style change. It is your job to decide whether the [abstract phrase](#) “the ministers affected” is sufficient for your message.

RELATIVE CLAUSE OPPORTUNITIES

I have given you a detailed section on [relative clauses](#). These clauses often signal that you have a chance to make two short sentences out of one longer sentence.

Here is an example.

Hard to Read:

Widgets Canada's Export Policy Branch, which analyzes trends in widget trade, fosters trade opportunities in North America and overseas, and advises on export policy, is planning a Team Canada mission for February 1997.

Better:

Widgets Canada's Export Policy Branch — which analyzes trends in widget trade, fosters trade opportunities in North America and overseas, and advises on export policy — is planning a Team Canada mission for February 1997.

Best:

Widgets Canada's Export Policy Branch analyzes trends in widget trade, fosters trade opportunities in North America and overseas, and advises on export policy. This branch is planning a Team Canada mission for February 1997.

or:

Widgets Canada's Export Policy Branch is planning a Team Canada mission for February 1997. This branch analyzes trends in widget trade, fosters trade opportunities in North America and overseas, and advises on export policy.

or:

Widgets Canada's Export Policy Branch is planning a Team Canada mission for February 1997.

or:

Widgets Canada is planning a Team Canada mission for February 1997.

Note that the last two options make content changes, not style changes. It is your job to decide whether an abstract term such as "Widgets Canada" or "Widgets Canada's Export Policy Branch" would be sufficient to convey your message. In making that decision, bear in mind that organizational matters that are of vital importance to your job may be significantly less relevant to the decisions the Minister must make.

Here are a few other examples:

SPECIFYING CLAUSES

Before

This morning Michelle will meet with the accountant who is auditing our books.

Jacqueline has decided to turn this problem over to the management consulting unit whose expertise lies in database management.

Richard has been chosen to lead the task force that we set up last week to develop an implementation plan.

After

An accountant is auditing our books. This morning Michelle will meet with her.

One of the management consulting units has expertise in database management. Jacqueline has decided to turn this problem over to it.

We set up a task force last week to develop an implementation plan. Richard has been chosen to lead it.

DESCRIBING CLAUSES

Before

I would like you to meet my supervisor, who has worked here for three years.

Jacqueline has decided to turn this problem over to the Management Consulting Unit, which has expertise in database management.

Richard has been chosen to lead the Green Energy Task Force, which was formed on March 30, 2001.

After

I would like you to meet my supervisor. He has worked here for three years.

Jacqueline has decided to turn this problem over to the Management Consulting Unit. It has expertise in database management.

Richard has been chosen to lead the Green Energy Task Force. It was formed on March 30, 2001.

“THEREFORE” OPPORTUNITIES

Hard to Read:

Because Widget 22-B is bulky, heavy, slow, difficult to use, hard to maintain and more expensive than we can afford, we have decided to buy Widget 38-C.

Better:

Widget 22-B is bulky, heavy, slow, difficult to use, hard to maintain and more expensive than we can afford. Therefore we have decided to buy Widget 38-C.