


Six principles
of clear,
cohesive, and
coherent
writing

Six principles


1. Keep your complete grammatical subjects short
2. Express key actions as verbs
3. Begin sentences with "old" information
4. End sentences with new information
5. Make the subjects of your sentences the person, place, or thing that the sentence is about
6. Make the first few words of your sentences constitute a limited set of concepts



Principle 1: Keep your complete grammatical subjects short

Long subject: *A full explanation of why the model cannot accommodate this particular case of omitted variable bias is given in the appendix.*

Short subject: *The appendix explains in full why the model cannot accommodate this particular case of omitted variable bias.*





Principle 2: Express key actions as verbs

There is *opposition* among many voters to nuclear power plants.
Many voters *oppose* nuclear power plants.

Economists made *attempts* to define full employment.
Economists *attempted* to define full employment.

We conducted a *review* of the matter.
We *reviewed* the matter.



Principle 3: Begin sentences with “old” information

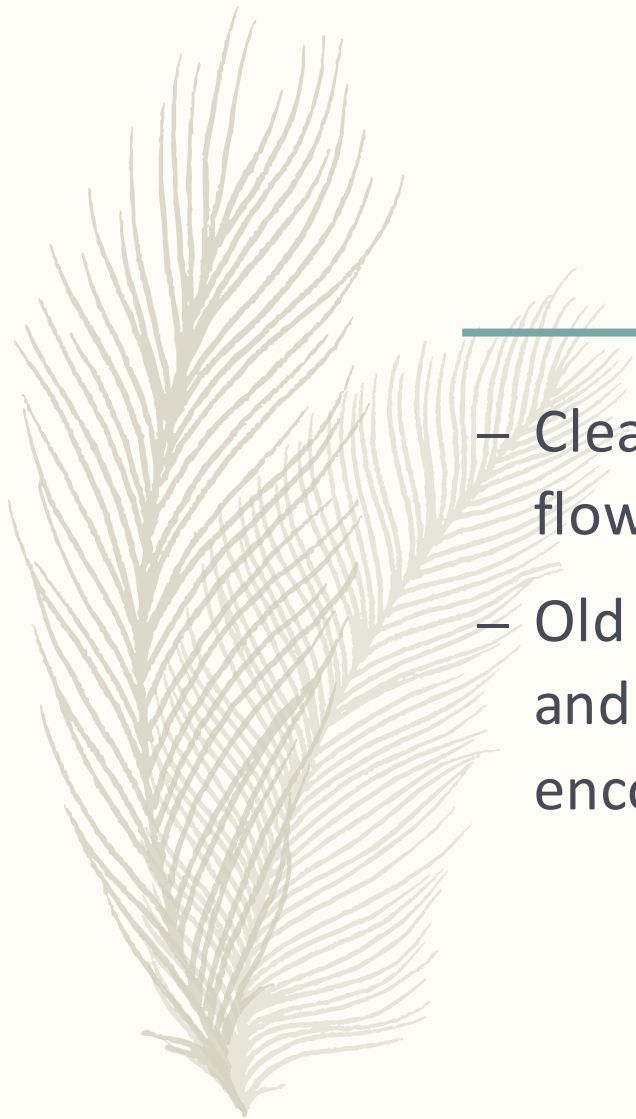
Here are two passages that say the same thing. Which flows better?

Passage #1


An effective way to write sentences that “flow” is to use the rhetorical device known as conduplicatio. To repeat a key word or phrase from a preceding sentence, especially when the word or phrase comes at the end of the preceding sentence, is to use conduplicatio.

Passage #2

An effective way to write sentences that “flow” is to use the rhetorical device known as conduplicatio. Conduplicatio repeats a key word or phrase from a preceding sentence, especially when the word or phrase comes at the end of the preceding sentence.

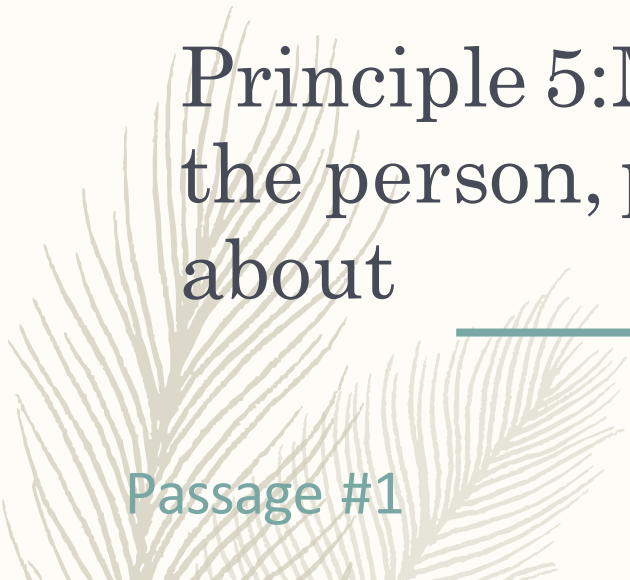


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- Clear writing is writing that flows, and best way to create flow is to begin sentences with old information
 - Old information is information- names words, phrases, and their equivalents – that your reader has already encountered or can reasonably anticipate



Principle 4: End sentences with new information

- New information is just that: information that your reader has not encountered yet or could not anticipate
- New information is the most important in a sentence; it thus should receive the most emphasis, and the place of most emphasis in a sentence is at the end



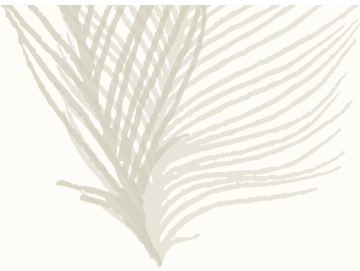
Principle 5: Make the subjects of your sentences the person, place, or thing that the sentence is about

Passage #1

Omitted variable bias has plagued studies of student achievement. *It* has prevented researchers from reaching confident conclusions about the best way to reform the education system. (This “story” is about omitted variable bias.)


Passage #2

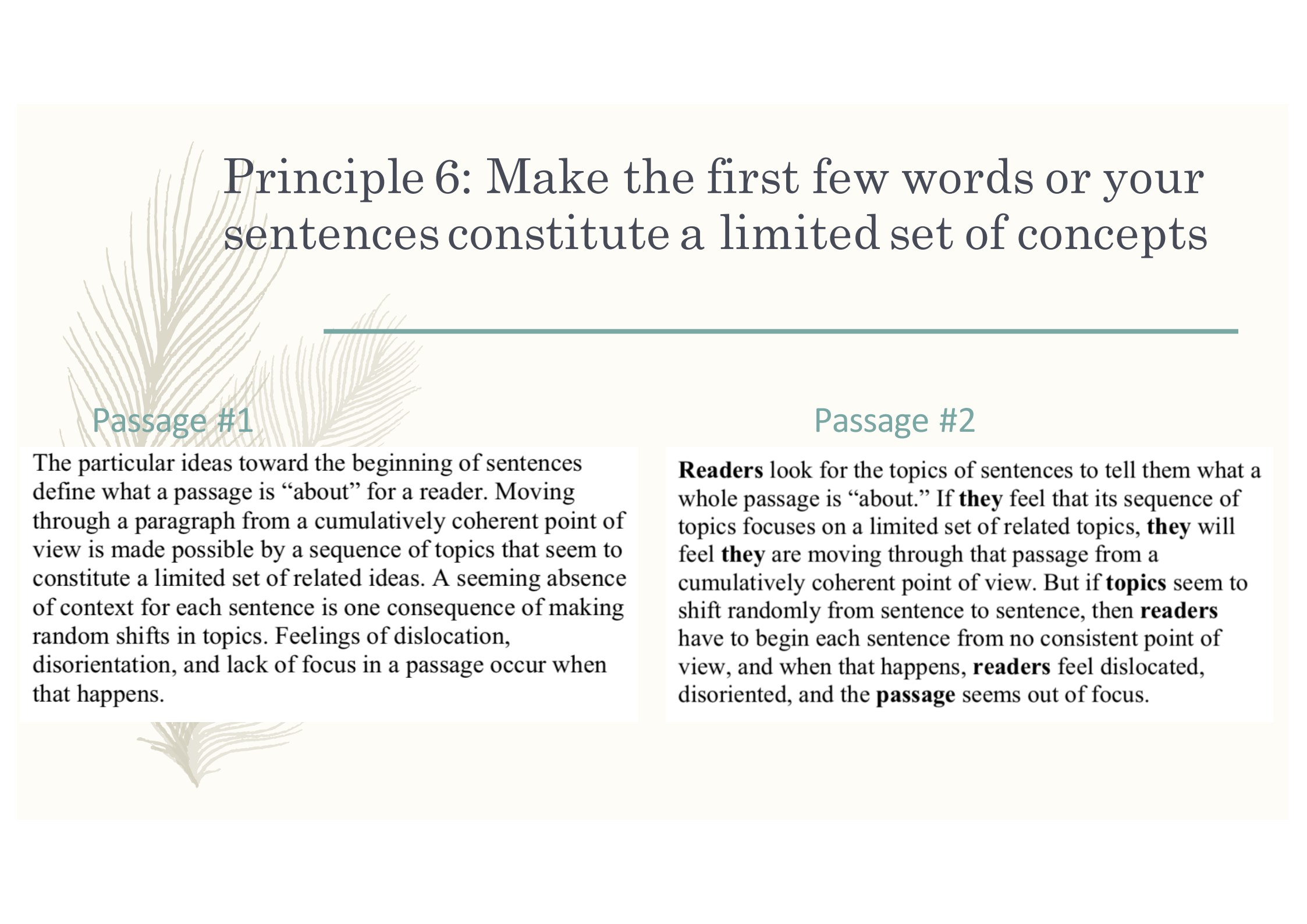
Educational researchers have long been stymied by the problem of omitted variable bias. *They* therefore cannot be confident that their studies yield reliable conclusions about the best way to reform the education system. (This “story” is about educational researchers.)





Which sentence is best?

1. Gary Becker was awarded the Nobel Prize for economics in 1992.
 2. The 1992 Nobel Prize for economics was awarded to Gary Becker.
 3. The year 1992 saw Gary Becker win the Nobel Prize for economics.
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Principle 6: Make the first few words of your sentences constitute a limited set of concepts

Passage #1

The particular ideas toward the beginning of sentences define what a passage is “about” for a reader. Moving through a paragraph from a cumulatively coherent point of view is made possible by a sequence of topics that seem to constitute a limited set of related ideas. A seeming absence of context for each sentence is one consequence of making random shifts in topics. Feelings of dislocation, disorientation, and lack of focus in a passage occur when that happens.

Passage #2

Readers look for the topics of sentences to tell them what a whole passage is “about.” If **they** feel that its sequence of topics focuses on a limited set of related topics, **they** will feel **they** are moving through that passage from a cumulatively coherent point of view. But if **topics** seem to shift randomly from sentence to sentence, then **readers** have to begin each sentence from no consistent point of view, and when that happens, **readers** feel dislocated, disoriented, and the **passage** seems out of focus.





Reference

Dudenhefer, P. (2009). A Guide to Writing in Economics.
Department of Economics, Duke University.