



Paragraph and Sentence Strategy: Moving From Known (Old) Information to Unknown (New) Information

Any piece of writing, no matter what its topic is, owes a great deal to history. Without knowing the history of something, it is difficult for a reader to comprehend its present or future conditions. Readers can better understand where a writer is going if they first know where they've been.

It is important, therefore, for the writer to establish the known, or old, material first. Afterward, he or she can move on to the unknown, or new, information without the fear of puzzling his or her readers.

Establishing the Known:

Let's look at an example: It is black and white, and it circulates daily.

What is "it"? Some savvy readers may have inferred that the sentence above may be discussing a local newspaper. However, not all readers may have clearly understood what "it" is. To rule out any chance of confusion, a writer needs to make the known information apparent early in the sentence, and then he or she may proceed with the new information.

The Anytown Gazette, a local newspaper, is black and white, and it circulates daily.

The revised example above gives the reader plenty of information early on. The writer can then continue to write about the newspaper in subsequent sentences by referencing what is now known information.

Strategy 1—Using Pronouns to Refer to the Known

The *Anytown Gazette*, a local newspaper, is black and white, and it circulates daily. It reaches over 50,000 readers in three counties each day. Its advertising costs are relatively low, and its readers have above-average buying power.

Notice how the writer refers to the newspaper as "it" and "its" to link the reader's thoughts back to the topic of the paragraph. He or she has made it clear in the beginning that the newspaper is what's being discussed. Therefore, he or she can take advantage of the fact that this is now "known" information and move on to the "new"



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information about the paper's circulation, its readers, its advertising costs, and its readers' buying power without having to mention the newspaper's name in every single sentence.

Strategy 2—Using Repetition of the Topic to Refer to the Known

Let's review the following passage and observe the inconsistencies in the order of known and new information.

Chocolate does more than just taste good—it has physiological effects. Spurts of energy are provided by caffeine, which is contained in chocolate. A sense of relaxation and comfort is caused by endorphins that it releases. A cannaboid, when consumed in very large quantities, can lead to altered states of consciousness.

The first sentence establishes the topic of chocolate, thereby making it known information. It then moves on to newer information by saying that "it" has physiological effects, which then becomes additional known information. However, the second sentence begins with new information about spurts of energy that are caused by caffeine. The reader has to get all the way to the end of the sentence to figure out that the author is still discussing chocolate. A similar situation takes places in the third and fourth sentences as well.

Here's a revised version of the passage:

Chocolate does more than just taste good—it has physiological effects. Chocolate contains caffeine, which provides spurts of energy. It releases endorphins, which create a sense of relaxation and comfort. Chocolate also contains a cannaboid which, when consumed in very large quantities, can lead to altered states of consciousness.

The author takes full advantage of known-to-new organization in the revised paragraph above. The reader can now smoothly follow the author's ideas and move from the beginning to the end of each sentence without having to stop and think. It is clear at the beginning of each sentence that the author is talking about chocolate, and the latter halves of all the sentences contain the new information.

Strategy 3—Using the Known to Link to the Preceding Sentences

The writer can also take what is considered new information in one sentence and make it the known information in the next sentence. Here is yet another revised version of the passage about chocolate, and this version makes use of this strategy:

Chocolate does more than just taste good—it has physiological effects. Chocolate contains caffeine, which provides spurts of energy. This caffeine releases endorphins. Such endorphins create a sense of relaxation and comfort. Chocolate also contains a cannaboid. This cannaboid, when consumed in very large quantities, can lead to altered states of consciousness. These altered mental states can...

The passage above makes use of the new information about caffeine in one sentence by making it the known information at the beginning of the subsequent sentence. The same strategy was used for the information about endorphins, the cannaboid, and the



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altered states of consciousness. The writer has created a “domino effect” here—each sentence’s new information falls into the next sentence’s known information.

Here is a list of questions that you can ask yourself to ensure that you are using this strategy as effectively as possible:

1. Is the topic, or known information, introduced early enough in the paragraph?
2. Does each sentence in the paragraph point back to the known information in a manner that will be clear to the reader?
3. Does each sentence in the paragraph put forward the new information only *after* the known information has been clarified?
4. Does the paragraph stay on topic from beginning to end without putting too much emphasis on either the known information or the new information?

You can test your understanding of this handout by completing Academic Center exercise available on the next page.



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Exercise: Moving From Known (Old) Information to Unknown (New) Information

Review the following passage. Identify the known information and the new information in each sentence by underlining both types of information and tying them together with an arrow.

The Puritans left England in a time of religious persecution and fled to a country they believed would offer the freedom to worship as they liked. The irony in this situation is that they denied others that same liberty. William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* offers insight into the struggles faced by the Pilgrims while they tried to sustain a community based on Puritan piety. Bradford shows the colony's demise through the citizens' adherence to a moral and religious code.

Answers

The Puritans left England in a time of religious persecution and fled to a country they believed would offer the freedom to worship as they liked. The irony in this situation is that they denied others that same liberty. William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* offers insight into the struggles faced by the Pilgrims while they tried to sustain a community based on Puritan piety. Bradford shows the colony's demise through the citizens' adherence to a moral and religious code.

Key:

Known information

New information

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