

Starting the New Year in Style



Michelle Kaczmarek

Graduate Writing Center | 111H Kern Building

gwc@psu.edu



[facebook.com/GWCPSU](https://www.facebook.com/GWCPSU)



[@gwc.psu](https://twitter.com/gwc.psu)

The Graduate Writing Center

One-to-one consultations online and in-person for all writing at any stage



Brainstorming
ideas



Working with
Sources



Understanding
Assignments



Revising
Drafts

To schedule a consultation

- visit the GWC website: gwc.psu.edu
- go directly to the online schedule: <https://secure.gradsch.psu.edu/wccal/studentview.cfm>

- To understand the basic grammatical elements of English
- To learn how to use these elements to create clarity and interest
- To help you develop the ability to play with sentences and create stylistic options

Goals

Workshop Agenda

1. The English Sentence
 2. 5 Style Principles
 3. Peer Review
 4. Wrap-up
-

But first,

What is the difference between style and grammar?

The English Sentence

What does an English sentence require?



Subject



Predicate



Subject (noun)

The dog

+

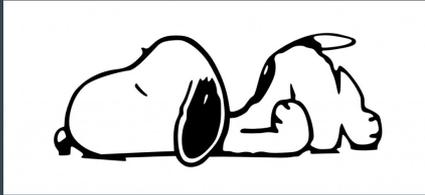
Predicate (verb)

runs

=

Independent Clause (sentence)

The dog runs.



The English Sentence

The accoutrements

- Adjectives
- Adverbs
- Prepositions
- Gerunds
- Infinitives
- Phrases
- Subordinate and Coordinate Clauses
- Conjunctions

All of the sudden you have this:

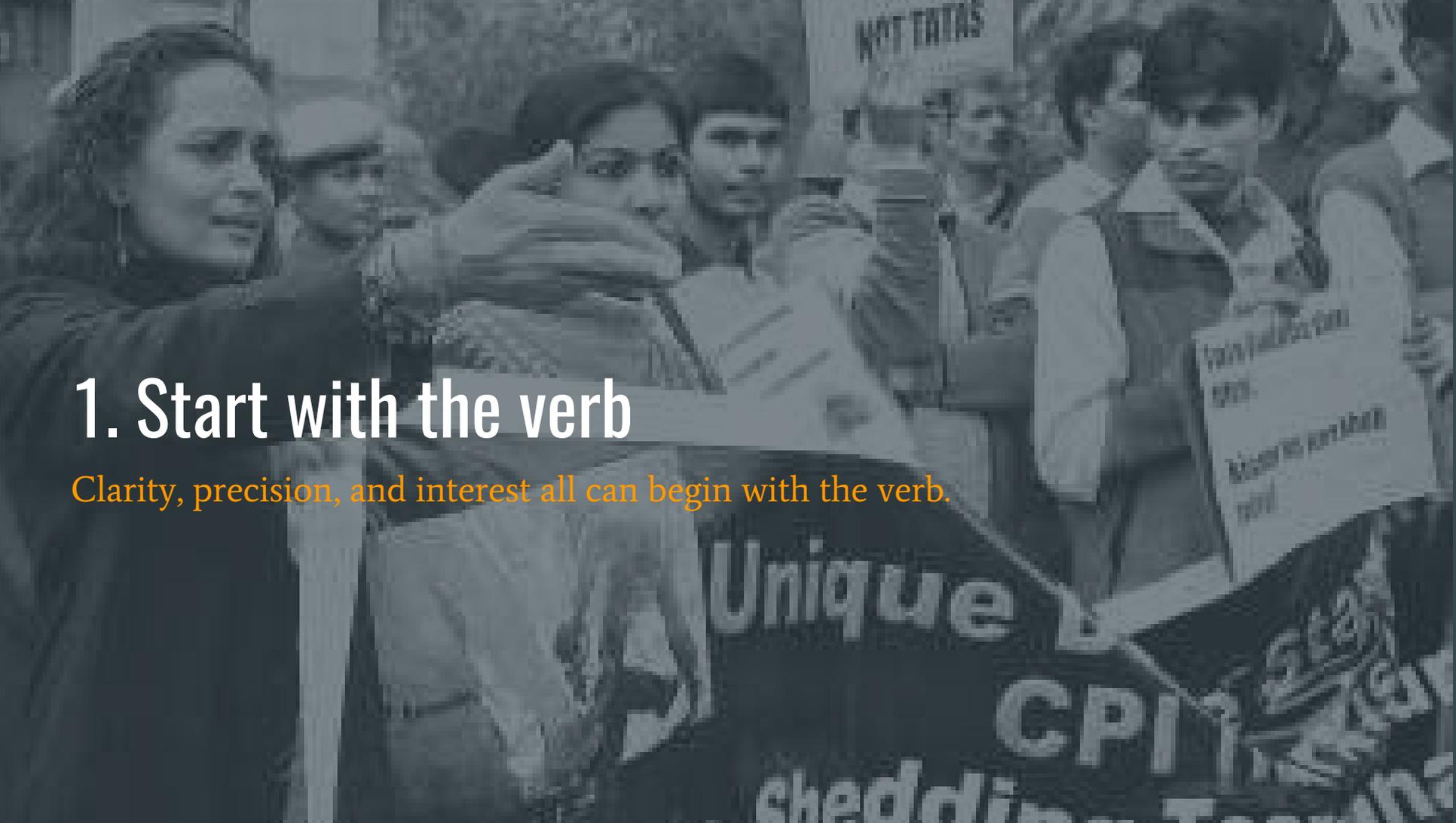
The big dog, realizing that he had perhaps only one last opportunity to bring order to a community torn by strife and lack of bureaucratic efficiency, decided to run and assume absolute control over the Jamestown settlers.

Remember, **you always need a subject and a predicate.** Additional clauses, phrases, adjectives can be used to add information and clarity but can never replace a subject and its predicate.

5 Style Principles

for adding clarity and interest

1. Start with the verb
 2. Place important information in the main clause
 3. Use sentence position for emphasis
 4. Repeat important words
 5. Punctuate for clarity
-



1. Start with the verb

Clarity, precision, and interest all can begin with the verb.

What are the verbs *doing*?

May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun.

(Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*)

Take for instance, the following sentence revisions:

Weak: It is a safe assumption to state the idea that the attitudes of our forefathers have affected the entire course of history.

Better: The attitudes of our forefathers have affected the entire course of history.

Weak: An expansion in the utilization of pencils was the cause of the reduction in the utilization of red ink.

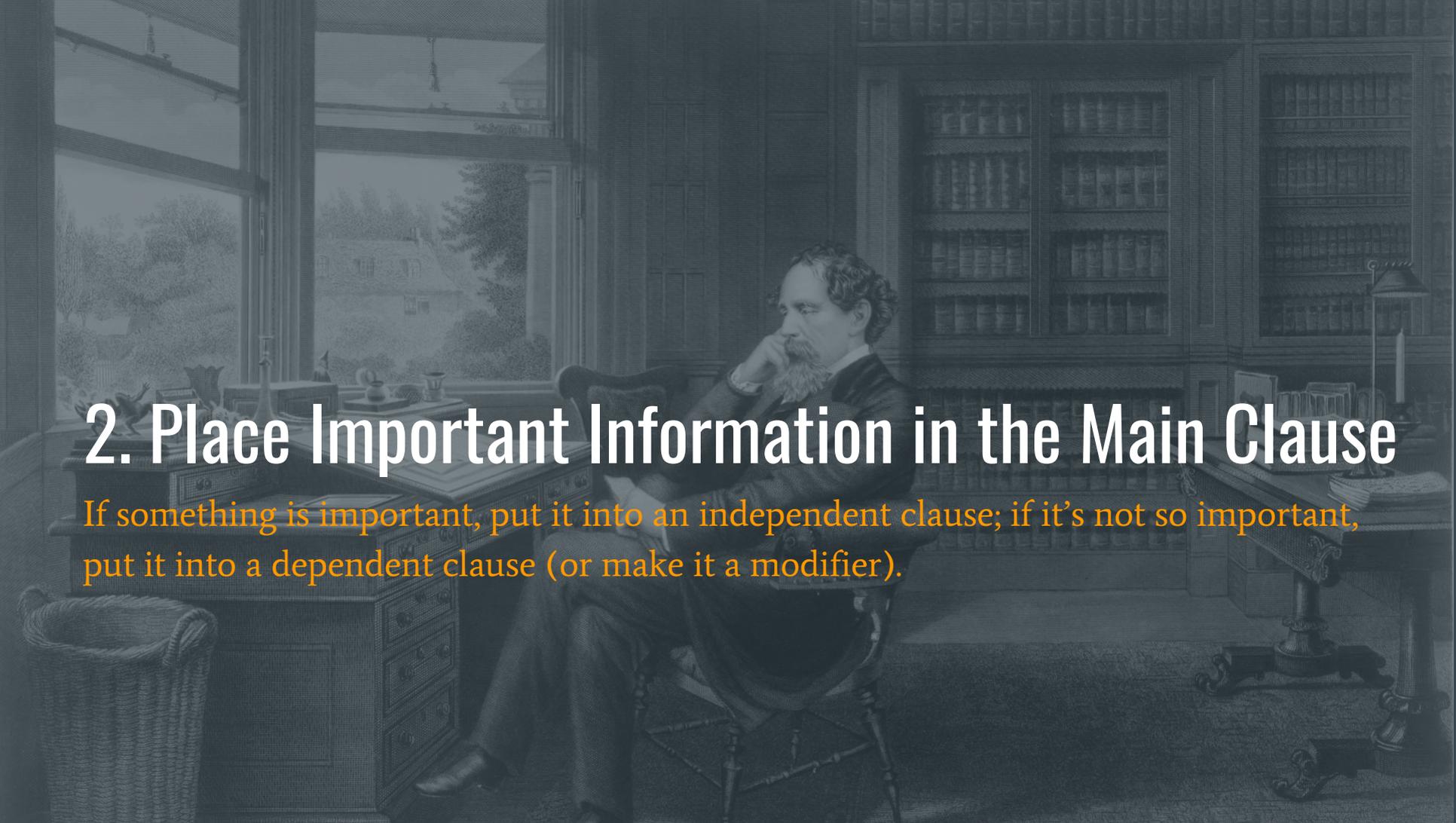
Better: People are using less red ink because they are using more pencils.

The case of passive voice

Passive voice: President Lincoln was shot by John Wilkes Booth.

Active voice: John Wilkes Booth shot President Lincoln.

but which is better?

A grayscale illustration of a man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark suit, sitting in a chair in a study. He is looking out a large window on the left, which shows a view of a house and trees. The room is filled with bookshelves, a desk with a lamp, and various books and papers. The overall atmosphere is quiet and scholarly.

2. Place Important Information in the Main Clause

If something is important, put it into an independent clause; if it's not so important, put it into a dependent clause (or make it a modifier).

Consider the following:

Pair #1

- When Hall of Fame catcher Johnny Bench was still in high school, he learned a foolproof way to hit a curve ball.
- Hall of Fame catcher Johnny Bench was still in high school when he learned a foolproof way to hit a curve ball.

Pair #2

- Although Yellowstone Park was once praised by Roosevelt for its great natural beauty, it is now the site of many tacky souvenir stands.
- Yellowstone Park was once praised by Theodore Roosevelt for its great natural beauty, although it is now the site of many tacky tourist stands.

Independent vs. Dependent

An **independent clause** is a clause that has a subject and verb that can stand as one complete sentence.

EX. Yellowstone Park was once praised by Theodore Roosevelt for its great natural beauty.

A **dependent clause** has a subject and verb but cannot stand on its own.

EX. Although Yellowstone Park was once praised by Theodore Roosevelt for its great natural beauty.

For you, and for any dear to you, I would do anything. If my career were of that better kind that there was any opportunity or capacity of sacrifice in it, I would embrace any sacrifice for you and for those dear to you. Try to hold me in your mind, at some quiet times, as ardent and sincere in this one thing. The time will come, the time will not be long in coming, when new ties will be formed about you--ties that will bind you yet more tenderly and strongly to the home you so adorn--the dearest ties that will ever grace and gladden you. O Miss Manette, when the little picture of a happy father's face looks up in yours, when you see your own bright beauty springing up anew at your feet, think now and then that there is a man who would give his life, to keep a life you love beside you!

(Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*)

Revise the following paragraph

Our road trips to Florida were long ones, but they never seemed too long. That's because we always had so much fun. The first leg of our trip was always given over to "Broadway." My two brothers and I would create and then perform three or four skits for my parents. For example, we once put on "The Courtship of Our Parents" as we imagined it, plus "A Trip to the Principal" and then a musical called "Blue Christmas." My parents would judge the skits, and the best performer would get an extra scoop of ice cream at our lunch stop. Then we started getting close to South of the Border. South of the Border is a pit stop and a tourist trap located about halfway between New York and our Florida destination. We stopped there on every trip for 2-3 hours. My brother and I would go on all the rides while our parents rested. (They needed it, believe me.) South of the Border was always a great treat. When the day was over, we would stay at a motel. After a good night's sleep, we'd be off again.



3. Use Sentence Position for Emphasis

If something is important, try to put it into the first or last position in the sentence.

Compare these two sentences:

- *Tootsie*, starring Dustin Hoffman, is one of the five best movie comedies of all time.
- One of the five best movie comedies of all time is *Tootsie*, starring Dustin Hoffman.

Ending on a strong note

Compare

If lefties received more recognition, then they wouldn't feel at a disadvantage. Lefties will win their "rights." It was recently declared International Lefties Day on August 13.

versus

Recently, they even declared International Lefties Day on August 13. If lefties got more recognition, then they wouldn't feel at a disadvantage. Lefties will win their "rights."

That night in my rented room, while letting the hot water run over my can of pork and beans in the sink, I opened *A Book of Prefaces* and began to read. I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean, sweeping sentences. Why did he write like that? And how did one write like that? I pictured the man as a raging demon, slashing with his pen, consumed with hate, denouncing everything American, extolling everything European or German, laughing at the weaknesses of people, mocking God, authority. What was this? I stood up, trying to realize what reality lay behind the meaning of the words . . . Yes, this man was fighting, fighting with words.

(Richard Wright, “Library Card”)



4. Repeat Important Words

If something is important, think about repeating it within the sentence.

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of "interposition" and "nullification" -- one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today! I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together." This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day. And this will be the day -- this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning: "My country 'tis of thee ..."

Play at 1:48 →



Where does the emphasis fall?

- Malcolm X famously embraced the Nation of Islam, but in his stirring speeches he frequently cited the Christian Bible.
- Malcolm X famously embraced the Nation of Islam--embraced it with unwavering commitment--but in his stirring speeches he frequently cited the Christian Bible.
- Malcolm X famously embraced the Nation of Islam, but in his stirring speeches--stirring in their eloquence and rhetorical exuberance--he frequently cited the Christian Bible.
- Malcolm X embraced the Nation of Islam, but in his speeches he frequently cited the Christian Bible, the Christian Bible that his father loved.

Why might this be too much of a bad thing?

It seemed the years of prosperity were to come to an end for **Castroville**. In the 1880s, **Castroville** rejected a proposition from a railroad company due to the cost and it was subsequently built five miles south of **Castroville**. This killed the freighting business of **Castroville** almost at once, and in 1892 the county seat was also moved to Hondo. Many of the people of **Castroville** moved to the new county seat, while others moved to San Antonio.

Quick fix

It seemed the years of prosperity were to come to an end for **Castroville**. In the 1880s, **Castroville** rejected a proposition from a railroad company due to the cost and it was subsequently built five miles south of **Castroville**. This killed the freighting business of **Castroville** almost at once, and in 1892 the county seat was also moved to Hondo. Many of the people of **Castroville** moved to the new county seat, while others moved to San Antonio.



The situation changed in the 1880s, after **Castroville** rejected a proposition from a railroad company to construct a line through the town. It was subsequently built five miles south of the community. This quickly killed off the local freighting business. In 1892 the county seat transferred to Hondo. Many Castrovillians moved there, while others withdrew to San Antonio.

A dark-furred dog is drinking from a glass. In the background, a man with a beard is looking on. The scene is dimly lit, with a blueish-grey tint.

5. Punctuate for Clarity

If something is important (or unimportant), use punctuation marks--dashes and parentheses and even colons--to signal that importance (or lack of importance)

Compare these several versions of the same sentence

- Charles Darwin, who dropped out of college for a time, who transferred to another university before his senior year, and who, for lack of anything better to do, drifted aboard *The Beagle* right after graduation, is an inspiration to many contemporary twenty-somethings.
- Charles Darwin--who dropped out of college for a time, who transferred to another university before his senior year, and who, for lack of anything better to do, drifted aboard *The Beagle* right after graduation--is an inspiration to many contemporary twenty-somethings.
- Charles Darwin (who dropped out of college for a time, who transferred to another university before his senior year, and who, for lack of anything better to do, drifted aboard *The Beagle* right after graduation) is an inspiration to many contemporary twenty-somethings.
- Charles Darwin, who dropped out of college for a time, who transferred to another university before his senior year--and who (for lack of anything better to do) drifted aboard *The Beagle* right after graduation--is an inspiration to many contemporary twenty-somethings.

Decoding Punctuation

- — Dashes are meant to tell the reader “pay special attention!”
- () Parentheses do the opposite; they tell the reader that something unimportant is coming (so unimportant, perhaps, that we don’t even need to read it)
- The colon fulfills two functions: they come at the end (or before, but not within) an independent clause, and they signal the movement from general to specific or specific to general.
- The semicolon is used to separate two independent clauses; don’t use a semicolon unless you could substitute a period for it.

The comma

- Commas signal to the reader where the independent clause begins and ends and usually offset the independent clause from any interrupters or non-essential elements, introductory phrases or clauses, and sometimes concluding phrases or clauses.

Hints for the Comma Conundrum

Comma after an introductory/dependent clause

When I return home, my father will greet me with open arms.

No comma before a dependent clause/phrase coming at the end of a sentence

My father will greet me with open arms when I return home.

Comma marking an interrupter from the independent clause

When I return home, my father, who is the one man I love in this world, will greet me with open arms.

No comma around an essential element

When I return home, the one man I love in this world my father will greet me with open arms.

“I heard the rocket and I knew I could not get into the ring in time to see the bulls come in, so I shoved through the crowd to the fence.”

(Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*)

Revise the following paragraph

Our road trips to Florida were long ones, but they never seemed too long. That's because we always had so much fun. The first leg of our trip was always given over to "Broadway." My two brothers and I would create and then perform three or four skits for my parents. For example, we once put on "The Courtship of Our Parents" as we imagined it, plus "A Trip to the Principal" and then a musical called "Blue Christmas." My parents would judge the skits, and the best performer would get an extra scoop of ice cream at our lunch stop. Then we started getting close to South of the Border. South of the Border is a pit stop and a tourist trap located about halfway between New York and our Florida destination. We stopped there on every trip for 2-3 hours. My brother and I would go on all the rides while our parents rested. (They needed it, believe me.) South of the Border was always a great treat. When the day was over, we would stay at a motel. After a good night's sleep, we'd be off again.

Part Three
Peer Review

Exchange papers

in groups of three

1. Mark any verbs that you think could be improved
 2. Identify any information that needs to be moved to a main clause
 3. Mark one place where sentence position could be re-arranged for emphasis.
 4. Circle one word that could be repeated.
 5. Either add a new point of punctuation or change the punctuation of one sentence for emphasis.
-

Discussion

1. What were some trends that you noticed?
2. What seemed to be apparent weaknesses in your peer's writing?
3. What seemed to be their strengths?
4. What do you think will be hardest to revise?

Now, according to this feedback, revise your sentences.

One last time

1. Exchange your revised writing with your peer.
2. Discuss the changes, any points you had trouble with and remaining issues.
3. Solicit feedback for one last time.
4. Make a final revision, trying to improve and play around with at least 3 more sentences.



Developing an effective style is about **generating** a variety of possibilities and **choosing** from among them. Don't settle on your first version of a sentence; always play around.

**Thank you for
attending!**

Make an appointment to visit us at

The Graduate Writing Center

111H Kern Building

gwc.psu.edu

