
The Last Word

If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop your story.

—ORSON WELLES IN *ORSON WELLES INTERVIEWS*

Plants are fueled by a simple sugar that results from a magic combination of sunlight, water, and carbon dioxide: glucose. To borrow the title of a Dylan Thomas poem, glucose is “the force that through the green fuse drives the flower.” When this sweet power source runs low, a plant experiences a chlorophyll shortage, which triggers it to do something remarkable. A plant running on empty pours most of its energy into the latent buds at its branch tips. Gardeners call this phenomenon *terminal dominance*.

Did you notice that, like sugar-deprived plants, all the sentences in the previous paragraph push their energy to the terminus? In sentence after sentence, the most important word appears just before the period. All these sentences exemplify a powerful principle that writers have followed for centuries, a principle that the iconic pair William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White (whose thoroughly highlighted, falling-apart 1972 edition of *The Elements of Style* taught me much of what I know about powerful writing) sum up as follows: “Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end.”⁸⁸

Bryan Garner, who agrees that “the punch word in a sentence should come at the end” urges writers to read their sentences aloud, “exaggerating the last word in each sentence. If the reading sounds awkward or

88. William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 2nd ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1972), 26. Note: In the 2005 3rd edition, whimsically illustrated by Maira Kalman, this statement falls on page 52.

foolish, or if it seems to trail off and end on a trivial note, the sentence should probably be recast.”⁸⁹

Note the strategic location of Garner’s operative word, *recast*.

Emphatic endings can produce periodic sentences, which are long-

ish, usually complex constructions that gradually, after the unfolding of a series of delaying phrases, not unlike the ones you’re reading right now, wind their way toward the main point. Writers from Cicero to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to Barack Obama have created masterful periodic sentences in every genre, from oratory to poetry to memoir, always bringing the reader to a full stop on a word that resonates.

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oratory to poetry to memoir, always bringing the reader to a full stop on a word that resonates. For example, the night he won the 2008 US presidential election, Barack Obama did not open his speech in Chicago by saying, “Tonight is your answer, in case you wondered if the dream of our founders is still alive in our time.” He opened with a periodic build: “If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.”⁹⁰

I recommend mastering the periodic sentence yourself. Have fun with it, even. Beware, though. If you overuse this structure, strewing clause after clause (whether independent or dependent) in front of your main ideas, front-loading too many sentences in a row, withholding gratification over and over, your readers (who, if you’re lucky, want to find out what you’re getting at) may stray from what you’re saying and focus, as you may be doing right now, on the syntax.

89. Garner, *Garner’s Modern American Usage*, 734.

90. “Transcript: ‘This Is Your Victory,’ Says Obama,” CNN Politics, November 4, 2008, http://articles.cnn.com/2008-11-04/politics/obama.transcript_1_transcript-answer-sasha-and-malia?_s=PM:POLITICS.

For example, unless your name is Nikolai Gogol, you probably want to avoid giving any sentence this much of a wind-up:

Even at the hour when the grey St. Petersburg sky had quite dispersed, and all the official world had eaten or dined, each as he could, in accordance with the salary he received and his own fancy; when all were resting from the departmental jar of pens, running to and fro from their own and other people's indispensable occupations, and from all the work that an uneasy man makes willingly for himself, rather than what is necessary; when officials hasten to dedicate to pleasure the time which is left to them, one bolder than the rest going to the theatre; another, into the street looking under all the bonnets; another wasting his evening in compliments to some pretty girl, the star of a small official circle; another—and this is the common case of all—visiting his comrades on the fourth or third floor, in two small rooms with an ante-room or kitchen, and some pretensions to fashion, such as a lamp or some other trifle which has cost many a sacrifice of dinner or pleasure trip; in a word, at the hour when all officials disperse among the contracted quarters of their friends, to play whist, as they sip their tea from glasses with a kopek's worth of sugar, smoke long pipes, relate at times some bits of gossip which a Russian man can never, under any circumstances, refrain from, and, when there is nothing else to talk of, repeat eternal anecdotes about the commandant to whom they had sent word that the tails of the horses on the Falconet Monument had been cut off, when all strive to divert themselves, Akakiy Akakievitch indulged in no kind of diversion.⁹¹

Read that sentence in one breath!

By the way, the term *periodic* doesn't always imply a period. Any independent clause (that is, any complete thought that stands alone grammatically) can be periodic, even if it ends with a colon, a semicolon, or a dash. If a period *could* go there, so can the word with the most punch; you don't have to come to a literal point to come to your point.

91. Nikolai Gogol, "The Overcoat" (1842), accessed May 11, 2012, <http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/Over.shtml>.

Periodic structure applies also to multisentence paragraphs. In a periodic paragraph, the topic *sentence* comes last. Take the following periodic paragraph from Jack Hart's book *Storycraft*. Hart builds anticipation sentence by sentence so that the final words—words that reflect a critical journalistic decision—detonate.

But what product [should the reporter focus on? He] considered several and finally landed on a doozy. It flowed to the Pacific Rim in vast quantities, where sales depended on the growing middle class, the group most threatened by the economic crash. Our region dominated its production. It was familiar, low-tech, non-threatening, and easy to understand. If anything linked the Pacific Northwest to the Asian economic crisis, [the reporter] said, it was the McDonald's frozen french fry.⁹²

William Zinsser echoes the importance of a paragraph's final sentence, likening it to “the periodic ‘snapper’ in the routine of a stand-up comic.”⁹³ He says, “These ‘snappers’ at the end of a paragraph propel readers into the next paragraph.”⁹⁴

You can propel your own readers along by treating all kinds of endings—paragraphs, sentences, stanzas, sections, verses, or chapters—strategically. As Strunk and White put it, “The principle that the proper place for what is to be made most prominent is the end applies equally to the words of a sentence, to the sentences of a paragraph, and to the paragraphs of a composition.”⁹⁵ (Strunk and White missed an opportunity here in concluding their sentence—and in fact their whole chapter—with *composition*. They could have reinforced their the point with positioning: “To strengthen your sentences, paragraphs, and entire compositions, put your prominent information at the end.”)

92. Hart, *Storycraft*, 184.

93. Zinsser, *On Writing Well*, 66.

94. *Ibid.*, 257.

95. Strunk and White, *Elements of Style*, 2nd ed., 27 (page 53 in the illustrated 3rd edition).

When you're ready to make the Big Point, when you've come to the main thing that you want people to remember or the action you want them to take, when you've reached the climax of your argument, when your most potent word has worked its way down to your fingertips and is practically bursting, you may debate whether to bold it, you may consider all-capping it, you may toy with italicizing it, but you know beyond all doubt exactly where to put it: here.