

Virginia Tufte

ARTFUL SENTENCES:

Syntax as Style



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 CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> | 5 |
| 1 Short Sentences | 9 |
| 2 Noun Phrases | 37 |
| 3 Verb Phrases | 63 |
| 4 Adjectives and Adverbs | 91 |
| 5 Prepositions | 111 |
| 6 Conjunctions and Coordination | 125 |
| 7 Dependent Clauses | 139 |
| 8 Sentence Openers and Inversion | 155 |
| 9 Free Modifiers: Branching Sentences | 171 |
| 10 The Appositive | 189 |
| 11 Interrogative, Imperative, Exclamatory | 205 |
| 12 Parallelism | 217 |
| 13 Cohesion | 237 |
| 14 Syntactic Symbolism | 253 |
| <i>Bibliography-Index of Authors and Editions Quoted</i> | 275 |
| <i>Index of Terms</i> | 301 |

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Verb Phrases

*We went to Italy, we went to Ireland, we went to Williamsburg,
we went to Montreal, we went to St. Martin, and Mark drove
and I navigated and Julie suggested wrong turns and Arthur
fell asleep.*

Nora Ephron

*Many times during the night I woke to listen, listen, but there
is no sound at all. The silence is as thick and soft as wool. Will
the snow never stop falling?*

May Sarton

*It is men tormenting and killing a bull; it is a bull being tor-
mented and killed.*

Max Eastman

About adjectives: all fine prose is based on the verbs carrying the sentences. They make sentences move. Probably the finest technical poem in English is Keats's *Eve of Saint Agnes*. A line like:

The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass,

is so alive that you race through it, scarcely noticing it, yet it has colored the whole poem with its movement—the limping, trembling, and freezing is going on before your own eyes.

F. Scott Fitzgerald in a letter to his daughter,
Frances Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up*, 303

MOST VERBS are action words. A few assert a state of being rather than an action. The very essence of a sentence, something *said* about a subject, often depends on verbs: it is the verb phrase that does much of the *saying*.

These generalizations apply not only to the main predicate verb but to verb phrases of other kinds as well—participles, gerunds, infinitives—which are labeled *verbals* because they remain verb-like even while behaving like other parts of speech. F. Scott Fitzgerald, advising his daughter “about adjectives,” directs her attention to verbs. In his example from Keats, “limped” is the *finite verb*, the verb that carries tense and fills the predicate position. As a verb, it does indeed make the sentence “move,” to use Fitzgerald’s word, but it also describes, as might an adjective. And the two *nonfinite verb* forms, “trembling” and

“frozen,” (a present participle and a past participle) also impart a feeling of movement in the manner of verbs and at the same time describe in the manner of adjectives.

The skilled writer can install verb phrases almost anywhere, as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s own prose demonstrates. Once he jotted in his notebook a sentence composed entirely of verbs:

Forgotten is forgiven.

Here he has converted two verbs—past participle forms—into nouns, a subject and a predicate nominative, thereby activating a normally static structure, the equative clause.

One important secret of success in writing is proficiency in using both the finite and nonfinite forms of verbs. Writers can create strong or subtle predicates, can introduce participles, gerunds, and infinitives into different positions within the kernel, can bring verbals into numerous locations alongside the basic kernel positions. Wherever verbs and verbals are placed, they enrich what is *said* by bringing with them their normal constituents—their attached subjects, complements, and modifiers.

Verbs can help to animate other structures, their energy level becoming almost contagious. Their intensities and rhythms invigorate other parts of speech and syntactic arrangements to create sustained patterns and levels of activity. In the extraordinary prose below, *racing ... leaping ... tumbling* and other verbs transmit their rushing rhythms and motion to the prepositions and nouns that follow:

After Inniscarra the hills gather closely, and the river laughs out loud. It dances, it prances, it rushes, it slides, calm for a moment then onward again, stream racing stream, leaping and tumbling, wild Bacchanalian, wine from the mountains, froth from the ecstasy blown through the reeds. Mile after mile, past larch woods and beech woods and fern-covered hillsides, castles, and ‘standing stones’ cresting high ground. In comes the torrent from wild Knockabrocka, bringing turf waters from Aghabullogue; down comes the water from Carriganish.

Robert Gibbings, *Lovely is the Lee*, 190

Some predicates with actions in series

Finite verbs, skillfully chosen, save a writer from added clauses and assorted modifiers. Actions can be set forth singly or one after the other, their juxtaposition or sequence itself meaningful. Thomas Jefferson’s verbs, by their very sequence, illustrate the increasing violence:

He has plundered our Seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the Lives of our People.

Declaration of Independence

Here are some contemporary sentences that also rely strongly on the particular sequence of the predicate verbs; although these verbs fall naturally, some are placed in a carefully devised order. The first example comes from a novel that has as its title a one-syllable active verb, *Thinks*. Active predicate verbs, mostly one-syllable, chronicle a series of routine actions that signal the end of a played-out affair:

She *slept* badly and *woke* before daybreak. Instead of waiting for her alarm to ring, she *got up*, *showered*, *dressed*, *drank* a cup of coffee, and *loaded* her car.

David Lodge, *Thinks*, 339

Next, a sequence of parallel predicates in a memoir unfolds a series of sense experiences:

Suddenly I *could see* the sun glinting off the water of Stockholm harbor and I *could smell* the fresh clean air. I *could feel* the velvet seats of the opulent movie theatre where I saw a six hour version of *Fanny and Alexander*. I *could hear* the hiss of the samovars and the sound of Russian being spoken.

Emily Prager, “Swedish Food,” 48

A parallel syntactic trio of verb phrases increases precision and implies an order of activity at the end of the following sentence:

Writing is much more premeditated than speaking: we are allowed to mull over our words for an awfully long time before setting them down, and once they are down, on the page or screen, we can *look at them*, *puzzle over them*, *revise them*.

Ben Yagoda, *The Sound on the Page*, xxxi

Below, predicate verbs form a series of enthusiastic imperatives:

One of the few things I know about writing is this: *spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it*, right away, every time. *Do not hoard* what seems good for a later place in the book or for another book; *give it, give it all, give it now*.

Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*, 78

Repetitive actions, even beyond those named, are implied in nine short independent clauses that form the compound sentence below. Five terse abutting clauses using the verb *went* with the same subject (*we*) list the actions performed as a group; these are followed by four short clauses connected by *and*, each with a different subject and different verb to identify actions of the individuals in the group, one by one:

We went to Italy, we went to Ireland, we went to Williamsburg, we went to Montreal, we went to St. Martin, and Mark drove and I navigated and Julie suggested wrong turns and Arthur fell asleep.

Nora Ephron, *Heartburn*, 101

A string of sentences, each consisting of a pair of contrastive clauses, is marked by assertive predicates:

He was a staunch churchman, but he laughed at priests. He was an able public servant and a courtier, but his views on sexual morality were extremely lax. He sympathized with poverty, but did nothing to improve the lot of the poor. It is safe to say that not a single law has been framed or one stone set upon another because of anything that Chaucer said or wrote; and yet, as we read him, we are of course absorbing morality at every pore.

Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*, 17

Again, in this and the next series of short independent clauses, the active predicates are strongly assertive. Below, the rhythm and emphasis help to direct attention to the trio of nouns—*craft, nuance, or beauty*—as well as to the verb phrase at the end of the second sentence:

Writers and intellectuals *can name, we can describe, we can depict, we can witness*—without sacrificing craft, nuance, or beauty. Above all, and at our best, we may sometimes help question the questions.

Adrienne Rich, *Arts of the Possible*, 167

In fiction as well as discursive prose, predicate verbs can be given an added insistence by using a series, or more than one, that simply repeats the verb itself. From the closing page of a novel:

So the coffin was enclosed and the soil did not come directly upon it. But then, how did one get out? One *didn't, didn't, didn't!* You *stayed, you stayed!*

Saul Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift*, 471

The *-ing* verb or verbal

The present participle in the conjugation carries the strongest sense of immediacy, of ongoing existence or activity, and sometimes of force, no matter where it is placed. Helped by an auxiliary, an object, and prepositional phrases, it serves as a predicate in “we are of course absorbing morality at every pore” in the example above from Virginia Woolf. When an *-ing* verb appears outside the predicate as an adjectival modifier, it is simply referred to as the present participle. When it functions as a noun, it is called a gerund. The *-ing* forms and the infinitive are often drawn into service together, several at a time, a generous accumulation in a sentence, paragraph, or series of paragraphs. Before such typical groupings are illustrated, however, here are a few examples of each one more or less alone, for a sense of the way each works.

The *-ing* form as predicate

The deadline for the second edition *was fast approaching*.

Katharine Graham, *Personal History*, 449

The sunlight then *was edging over the treetops*, and after I'd caught three more nice fish, it was level with my left shoulder, full and warm.

Fred Chappell, *I Am One of You Forever*, 34

Harry's heart *was pumping frantically* now that he knew they were on the right track.

J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, 776

The -ing form as present participle-adjectival

It was a *searing* Valley afternoon.
Sandra Tsing Loh, *Depth Takes a Holiday*, 91

"James," she said, urgent, *appealing*, afraid.
Doris Lessing, *The Grandmothers*, 303

A lovely *soaring* summer day this; winter sent *howling* home
to his arctic.
Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, ed. Leonard Woolf, 124

The *-ing* words and fragmentary nature of the diary entry above appropriately convey a sense that the action is happening now, this very day. No examples appear here, but use of such fragments and *-ing* words often attempts a stronger sense of immediacy and urgency in advertising and headlines, as well as in news broadcasts.

The -ing form as gerund (nominal)

Often suggesting a continuing process, gerunds occupy noun positions such as subjects, objects of verbs, and objects of prepositions:

Comparing the New Woman with the female aesthetes
can also help us refine our sense of both groups' politics.
Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, 15

I remember *seeing him a good many times* before I first spoke
to him.
C. P. Snow, "Rutherford," 4

It also isolated Adams: ... he was cut off from the advice and
contacts that in Washington were his for the *asking*.
Olivier Bernier, *The World in 1800*, 151

A prolific writer uses five *-ing* verbs as gerunds, objects of prepositions, to describe the continuing process of revising his novels. Linking the verbals by a repeated use of *and*, he sets a rhythm that suggests the actions themselves:

I have never written a novel yet (except *Thank you, Jeeves*)
without *doing* 40,000 words or more and *finding* they were
all wrong and *going* back and *starting* again, and this after

filling 400 pages with notes, mostly delirious, before *getting*
into anything in the nature of a coherent scenario.

P. G. Wodehouse, *P. G. Wodehouse: In His Own Words*, 149

The infinitive

Infinitives often impart as much vigor as finite verbs:

To trust is *to let go*.
Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*, 224

I learned *to bind books*. Then *to throw pots*.
Danny Gregory, *Everyday Matters*, 12

Mrs. Kelley reflected that, besides flying, one thing
she had neglected and would like now *to have done* was
to learn to swim.
John Hersey, *Here to Stay*, 18

The past participle

Past participles tend to perform a descriptive function:

What a thrill, what a shock, to be alive on a morning in
June, prosperous, almost scandalously *privileged*, with a
simple errand to run.
Michael Cunningham, *The Hours*, 10

... the Darwin of our times is changing. Traditionally, he is
a bluff, warm, helpful fellow, *racked* with illness yet *prepared*
to push on nevertheless.
Michael Ruse, "The Darwin Industry: A Guide," 222

Mixed examples

Most of the time, writers don't confine themselves to a single form of the verb or verbal but use several forms in combination. The examples that follow show a mixed collection of verbs and verbals. In general, the first group consists mostly of *-ing* participles and gerunds, the second group, infinitives, and the third group, past participles. One should

notice the predicate materials—adverbials and direct objects—that fill out the verb phrases. With free modifiers, set off by commas, the syntax allows a complex series of actions to be easily comprehended.

Verb phrases headed by present participles can also serve as *bound* (restrictive) modifiers, as in the first example below. The second and third excerpts contain present participles as bound modifiers followed by more present participles, set off from them by commas, as a long free-modifying series:

The little girls sat *watching the streets grow duller and dingier and narrower...*

Katherine Anne Porter, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, 40

They came *ambling and stumbling, tumbling and capering, kilting their gowns for leap frog, holding one another back, shaken with deep fast laughter, smacking one another behind and laughing at their rude malice, calling to one another by familiar nicknames, protesting with sudden dignity at some rough usage, whispering two and two behind their hands.*

James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 192

He hinted at himself *striding recognized down exotic streets, walking in sandals through dust, moving slowly behind an ox-cart or a rickshaw, or a dog-sled, kicking aside the encumbrance of a cashmere robe, a furred cloak, shading his eyes from the sun, sheltering his head from the snow, regarding unmoved typhoon and flood, seeing with familiarity such scenes as the quiet eye could not envisage, laughing and looking easily and speaking intimately in strange tongues; yes, he agreed, he was a stranger.*

Shirley Jackson, *The Sundial*, 95-96

More often, the entire participial verb phrase is a free or nonrestrictive modifier, easy to hook on or insert and making important contributions without new whole clauses:

Driving a small car on the motorway at 70 mph, with another car alongside him, he is impelled to imagine himself in a doggem, wanting to bounce cheerfully off this other vehicle.

Frank Kermode, *Pieces of My Mind*, 389

An author engages in word-play with an opening present participle, followed by a predicate with the same verb's past tense:

Concluding these reflections, he concluded these reflections...

John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*, 126

A predicate verb (*awaken*) and a verb transformed to a noun (*tremble*) combine with three present participles to describe a vivid sequence of remembered experiences:

For example, after a year in jail, I'd *awaken in a tremble, reliving all the terror, seeing it all again with ten-fold intensity, remembering for days afterward.*

Neil Cassady, *Collected Letters, 1944-1967*, 95

When there is more than one participial phrase, there may be no clear idea of sequence across them. They may appear simultaneous both with one another and with the main clause, especially when some of the actions described are mental. On the other hand, a sequence may be implied, strengthened too by adverbs, across space or time:

At a distance he can see the tall line of a dozen or more aqueduct arches, *commencing suddenly, suddenly ending; coming now from nowhere, now going nowhere.*

James Gould Cozzens, *Morning Noon and Night*, last page

-Ing verbs that hold down nominal slots, the very useful gerunds, retain also some of their action-giving, verb-like qualities. In the next excerpt are four such verb forms where one might expect to meet nouns, giving effective variety and life:

Turning from professional details and daily winning to consideration of these more fundamental problems requires not only the means of acquiring knowledge but also an opportunity and a stimulus for examining its broader significance.

George Gaylord Simpson, *The Meaning of Evolution*, 3

A gerund phrase also works as a subject in this reminiscence:

Stealing watermelons on dark and rainy nights was a pious duty when I was a boy.

Donald Day, *Uncle Sam's Uncle Josh*, 5

In a more intricate formation, the gerund is tied to its noun to serve as subject of the sentence. *Shape-shifting* becomes a seductive opening to a sentence that names it as one of the *wonders* soon to be identified in a series of clauses with unusually graphic finite verbs. Commas instead of semicolons or periods to separate the clauses enhance the rapid movement imparted by the verbs:

Shape-shifting is one of fairy tale's dominant and characteristic wonders: hands are cut off, and reattached, babies' throats are slit, but they are later restored to life, a rusty lamp turns into an all-powerful talisman, a humble pestle and mortar becomes the winged vehicle of the fairy enchantress Baba Yoga, the beggar changes into the powerful enchantress and the slattern in the filthy donkeyskin into a golden-haired princess.

Marina Warner, *From Beast to the Blonde*, xix

Often, as in the preceding example, the gerund's own verbal activity is closer to the described experience than a noun alone would be, if substituted. Gerunds are impressively flexible as to effect and position. Below, three gerunds serve as objects in a trio of parallel prepositional phrases:

They were grateful to me for *believing* in them, for *educating* them, for the practice of freedom, for *urging* them to become critical thinkers able to make responsible choices.
bell hooks, *Teaching Community*, 19

In a book on how war seduces and corrupts entire societies, the author expresses a sad truth in a prepositional phrase with a gerund as object:

The cause, sanctified by the dead, cannot be questioned without *dishonoring* those who gave up their lives.
Chris Hedges, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*, 145

Two gerunds, objects of prepositions, lead into an ironic commentary in a novel:

He moved to Gloucester fairly recently from Cambridge, and has that high-table trick of *being able* to make urbane conversation about any topic whatsoever *without saying* anything memorable or profound.
David Lodge, *Thinks*, 23

In the next two sentences, a social critic responds to her own challenge to *make work visible*, by using thirteen *-ing* words, gerunds, to name a long list of domestic chores and several contrasting pursuits:

However we resolve the issues in our individual homes, the moral challenge is, put simply, to make work visible again: not only the *scrubbing* and *vacuuming*, but all the *hoeing*, *stacking*, *hammering*, *drilling*, *bending*, and *lifting* that goes into *creating* and *maintaining* a livable habitat. In an ever more economically unequal world, where so many of our affluent devote their lives to ghostly pursuits like *stock trading*, *image making*, and *opinion polling*, real work, in the old-fashioned sense of labor that engages hand as well as eye, that tires the body and directly alters the physical world, tends to vanish from sight.

Barbara Ehrenreich, *Maid to Order*, 103

Although they function as nouns, the verb-like qualities of gerunds, below, describe potent actions—*forcing*, *filing*, and *hiring*:

Among *NOW's* first actions were *forcing* newspapers to eliminate sex-segregated help-wanted ads and *filing* a formal complaint against NASA that charged discrimination in the *hiring* not only of astronauts but also for top-level posts in its administration.

Martha Ackmann, *The Mercury* 13, 176

Next, in an autobiography, a gerund series stands in apposition to a direct object:

We also devised ordeals, which we suffered, as tests of courage, *walking bare-legged through stinging nettles*, *climbing high and difficult trees*, *signing our names in blood and so forth*.
Evelyn Waugh, *A Little Learning*, 59

Writers rely frequently on the infinitive phrase. In perhaps its most common form as a way of expanding finite verbs, the dependent infinitive or a chain of such infinitives, can open up a main verb phrase for important expansions, often widening into the major stretch of the sentence:

I was not quite conscious of it at first, but then it came again a bit stronger, until I was sure I heard it, and then as I was reading I began *to wait for it*, *and to make spaces in sentences for*

it, to enjoy it, and finally to play with the words and with the audience, to swoop and glide and describe arabesques with all the nutty abandon of Donald Duck on ice skates.

Shana Alexander, *Life Magazine*, 308

Infinitive phrases occupy nominal slots in all kinds of writing, sometimes as subject and complement in a *be*-pattern but also in many other arrangements of varying complexity:

To enjoy good houses and good books in self-respect and decent comfort, seems to me to be the pleasurable end toward which all societies of human beings ought now to struggle.

William Morris, *The Ideal Book*, 1

To picture himself passing the limit would be to admit into his imagination the reality of death; and this even now he could not do.

Iris Murdoch, *An Unofficial Rose*, 6

The infinitive of purpose has a unique dynamics. Here in the first example, four such infinitives help to define a book's purpose. Also effective as definitions are two gerund phrases in the second sentence:

We envision information in order *to reason about, communicate, document, and preserve that knowledge*—activities nearly always carried out on two-dimensional paper and computer screens. *Escaping this flatland and enriching the density of data displays* are the essential tasks of information design.

Edward Tufte, *Envisioning Information*, 33

The infinitive of purpose often begins simply with *to* rather than in *order to*. In many kinds of prose it serves as a forceful introductory device, sometimes as sentence modifier:

To find deeper meaning, one must become able to transcend the narrow confines of a self-centered existence and believe that one will make a significant contribution to life—if not right now, then at some future time.

Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 4

In the next example, repetition of the infinitive's verb creates a pause emphasizing the silence being described:

Many times during the night I woke to *listen, listen*, but there is no sound at all. The silence is as thick and soft as wool. Will the snow never stop falling?

May Sarton, *From May Sarton's Well*, 15

Among verb phrases, infinitive structures are probably given the least attention in discussions of style; they don't deserve this slighting. Essential for any writer who wants to cultivate ease and economy of style, they are natural, normal, efficient, and all the types converge effortlessly in many different sorts of prose. Here, in the ordinary course of things, four infinitive phrases help to develop three sentences:

There will always be the Christmas rush, the Summer Vacation in Europe and there will always be many more people who prefer *to fly during the daytime rather than at night*. These people are willing *to pay more for these privileges*. *To fill their flights* the airlines have been forced *to give a good break to others who will use their services at less popular times*.

Jim Woodman, *Air Travel Bargains*, 9

In past years many manuals of style sternly warned writers against using "split" infinitives, that is, infinitives with a word or words inserted between the "to" and the verb. Such uses can be awkward, but most often they are fine, a fact acknowledged in 1993 by *The Chicago Manual of Style* when they dropped the usage from their list of "errors and infelicities."

...in order to understand a medical condition, physicians need *to not only examine the patients but listen to them*...

Deborah Tannen, *Gender and Discourse*, 6

When such institutions run off the rails, the challenge is *to honestly analyze the failure and correct the flaw* so that the institution can regain legitimacy and trust.

Orville Schell, "Gray Lady and a Greek Tragedy," R12

Below, the split infinitive in the second sentence perhaps may create more appropriate emphasis than would the conventional arrangement. The reference is to a World Family Tree on the internet:

So far it has tied together seventy-five thousand family trees, a total of 50 million names. The goal, once unthinkable, is *to eventually document and link every named human who ever lived*.

Stewart Brand, *The Clock of the Long Now*, 91

In his classic *A Grammar of the English Language*, George O. Curme defended the split infinitive in nine pages mostly devoted to "a large number of characteristic examples taken from the author's much larger collection." Included is Willa Cather's line:

How satisfactory it would be to really know . . .
The Song of the Lark, 421

Past participles often join infinitives and gerunds in basic functions and as modification before, during, or after a main clause. Like present participles, they are usually nonrestrictive modifiers. Here a sentence opens with four past participles and ends with a present participial:

Repudiated, embraced, attributed, claimed, it turns up everywhere, changing shape with the times.
Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom*, xi

Opening participles, like the four italicized above and the one below, can serve as a cohesive device by making clear the relationship of an idea or action completed earlier to one that is about to be named:

Leonardo da Vinci was praised for a spectacle he devised in 1493 that featured seven gyrating planets. *Entitled Il Paradiso*, it was one of the first court entertainments totally enclosed in a specially created and permanent environment where an aristocratic audience was presented with calculated visual and aural delights.

Carol Lee, *Ballet in Western Culture*, 56

Here in a sentence introduced by a past participial modifier, a biographer describes Nikita Krushchev's responses to books given to him by his son:

Emboldened by his father's reaction to *Zhivago*, Sergei produced Solzhenitsyn's *First Circle* and *Cancer Ward* and George Orwell's *1984*. At these, however, Krushchev's responses drew the line; "He didn't like them," Sergei said.
William Taubman, *Krushchev*, 628

Some past participles, like the above, are reduced passive assertions, economical in the making of sentences because they eliminate the need for a separate passive clause. In the following deft sentence, the opening verbal appears to be a playful faked passive, or an abbreviated active *having overslept*:

Overslept, he awoke with a bang and was splashing cold water on his face when the landlady knocked.
Bernard Malamud, *A New Life*, 364

Taken from a passive statement, the material that accompanies the past participle is often a prepositional phrase, sometimes of agent or of instrument:

Tossed from side to side by the sharp turns, jerked forward by the sudden stops, his ear assailed by shrieking brakes and surly horns, he goes on talking or reading his paper, and reaches his destination heedless of the miracle that has brought him there.
William K. Zinsser, *The City-Dwellers*, 78

In the left-branch above, the third phrase (*his ear assailed*) shows the function of the verb phrase within the larger structure known as the nominative absolute, a form exemplified in the preceding chapter and to appear again later. The two participial phrases that precede it make another point about the past participial phrase: its pastness may not come across strongly. The essence of the past participle is rather its passivity, and it may be used to represent, as it does here, an action performed upon the subject of the main clause at the same time that the action of the main clause is going on. But this is not always so. The front-shifted position, especially, can be used for an economical summary or prior action, as in the next example, after which the main clause arrives; out of it, the action grows:

"Morally" weakened by fifteen years of service on the Editorial Committee, and physically disturbed by the approach of my sixty-third year, I agreed to abandon my normal habits of life and become (for a season) a statistical debauchee.
Don Cameron Allen, *The Ph.D. in English and American Literature*, vii

And here is a past participle in a nominative absolute, accompanying two opening adjectives:

Insoluble, unsolvable, the chord *suspended*—was it never to find resolution?

Conrad Aiken, *Ushant*, 60

The passive verb

Otters eat clams. The verb is in the active voice: the subject performs the action. *Clams are eaten by otters.* The verb is in the passive voice: the subject receives the action. Which form you choose depends on whether you have previously been writing about otters or clams. One of the uses of the passive is to shift the topic or the emphasis. Another use is to move the noun phrase that was the subject of discussion to a new location in the sentence, usually toward the end, where you can easily add as many modifiers as you like:

Clams are eaten by otters, those charming, popular furry sea creatures, clever in that they use tools—the otter uses a stone to crack the clam shell—and so great is their need for food that they daily consume 25 per cent or more of their body weight (some weigh more than 90 pounds), thereby reducing the shellfish population, according to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

For good or ill, the passive can be used to leave out the agent. You can relieve the otters of blame:

Clams are being eaten at such a rate that the shellfish population is disappearing.

The passive can thus be used if the performer of the action is unknown or if the writer does not wish to place responsibility.

There are, as with other inversions, many reasons for turning to the passive, including the need for special emphasis or rhythm, for strategic rearrangements of different kinds to aid modification or to increase cohesion, for adjustments in a parallel series, and for certain more thematic effects, often providing contrast with the active verbs.

The most basic result of the passive is the change made in what is emphasized. It is the nature of brief English utterance, such as short kernel patterns, to send the primary stress toward the end of the sen-

tence. It is therefore the nature of the passive to direct this emphasis at the phrase of agent or of instrument, or at both, or, when neither is there, at whatever happens to appear last (unless it is a pronoun):

I was tormented by strange hallucinations.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Nabokov's Congeries*, 91

We are made kind by being kind.

Eric Hoffer, *The Passionate State of Mind*, 77

His round sunburned face was marked by a certain watchful innocence.

Carson McCullers, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, 2

Every apartment I ever stayed in was loaded with them.

Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, 23, writing about cockroaches

Changing the sentence below from passive into active demonstrates how much more effective and understandable the passive can be, as composed by the author. First, a rewritten active version:

The Buddhist version of interior arrangement, where one strives to create a particular atmosphere with aesthetic minimalism, with an eye for simplicity, affirms in my own imagination this process of thinking and writing.

In my own imagination, this process of thinking and writing is affirmed by the Buddhist vision of interior arrangement, where one strives to create a particular atmosphere with aesthetic minimalism, with an eye for simplicity.

bell hooks, *Remembered Rapture*, 40

Below, the author has placed two passive verbs in parallel clauses that open two successive sentences. The verbs themselves draw emphasis as descriptions emerge of the ways distinctive facial characteristics relate to personal characteristics:

The thinness of his lips *was emphasized* by a narrow line of dark moustache; it seemed a hard, almost cruel mouth until he smiled, and then an expression of unexpected kindness would irradiate his whole face. The general gauntness of his looks *was accentuated* by the deep sockets from which his eyes looked out, always rather sadly.

George Woodcock, *The Crystal Spirit*, 3

Next, the clipped assertion that follows the charge of loud active verbs uses the passive to stress the quiet, italicized simplicity of the past participle *said*:

Do not worry about making your characters shout, intone, exclaim, remark, shriek, reason, holler, or any such thing, unless they are doing it for a reason. All remarks can be *said*.
Shirley Jackson, "Notes for a Young Writer," 239

Again, the passive form has allowed a writer to save until the end, for emphasis, the appropriate last word:

Her body, if concealed at all, is concealed *by a water lily, a frond, a fern, a bit of moss, or by a sarong—which is a simple garment carrying the implicit promise that it will not long stay in place*.
E. B. White, *The Second Tree from the Corner*, 108

Hemingway's short stories and novels are concerned *with the fundamentals of life, such as death*.
Richard Armour, *American Lit Relit*, 152

The particular effects that the passive can impart on the phrase of agency are illustrated in the examples that follow. Here the passive moves the agent to the beginning of the sentence for a change in emphasis:

By its multitude of memories memory will be driven to distraction.
James Gould Cozzens, *Morning Noon and Night*, 17

By the husbands of his wife's friends, Graham was considered lucky.
Eric Ambler, *Intrigue*, 5

Below, the phrase of agency is compounded:

The order was carried out on the twenty-ninth of November, *not by the public executioner, but by a gravedigger...*
Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 123

Sometimes the agent is dropped altogether, when it is unknown, well known, or unimportant—or the writer chooses for other reasons to omit it. The passive form makes this economy possible.

A warning should be posted, at this point, as to chronology.
John Hersey, *The Algiers Motel Incident*, 264

From the window all that could be seen was a receding area of grey.
Anita Brookner, *Hotel du Lac*, 7

The town was occupied, the defender defeated, and the war finished.
John Steinbeck, *The Moon Is Down*, 11

The creation of the entirely artificial environment that is now the Sacramento Valley was not achieved at one stroke, nor is it complete to this day.
Joan Didion, *Where I Was From*, 22

When present, the agent can also be accompanied by a phrase of instrument, as it is in this double structure:

He was then received into the convent *by the brethren with the kiss of peace* and again admonished *by the prior with the words...*
Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 27

More often, though, the phrase of instrument occurs when the agent is not directly mentioned:

The plays are stuffed like badly made beanbags *with false feeling, false knowledge, false humanity*.
Jack Kroll, "Theater of Crisis," 23

A secondary result of the passive is the creation of past participles for use in various adjectival slots, many of which have been seen earlier in this chapter. Not all adjectives ending in *-ed*, however, are past participles generated in this way. Three below are *stained, blistered, and exiled*:

In that kindly light the *stained* and *blistered* paint of the bungalow and the plot of weeds between the veranda and the dry waterhole lost their extreme shabbiness,

and the two Englishmen, each in his rocking chair, each with his whisky and soda and his *outdated* magazine, the counterparts of numberless fellow-countrymen *exiled* in the barbarous regions of the world, shared in the brief illusory rehabilitation.

Evelyn Waugh, *The Loved One*, 7-8

Here we come to a third area of the passive's use as a syntactic juggler. In addition to its ability to shuffle words for emphasis or for ease of modification, it can also adjust structures for smoother or clearer transition. The passive thus becomes a device for cohesion. Often the passive makes for a quick transition from the sentence in which it occurs to the opener of the sentence that follows. Here two passives placed back to back bring together for emphasis and coherence the agent and the passive core of the next sentence:

And whether it be genuine disgust, joy, grief, pity, shame or desire—it is accompanied *by a vague sense of gratification*. *We are gratified* by the discovery that we are not all shame and show, that there are elements in our inner make-up as organically our own as the color of our eyes and the shape of our nose.

Eric Hoffer, *The Passionate State of Mind*, 115

The shape of the passive itself frequently helps to shape larger passages. We meet it amid other sentences, and its own syntactic order directs us through the larger order of words, helping to unify it. Related to this cohesive function is the use of the passive to make possible a consecutive development of the same subject:

You see, *books* had been happening to me. Now *the books* were cast off back there somewhere in the churn of spray and night behind the propeller.

The Langston Hughes Reader, 317

The subject is able to get our attention at the beginning of each sentence only because the passive is used for the second.

Below, a versatile grammar joins active forms and two passives, making possible successive views of the same subject from different angles. This parallelism of first person openers is just right for the stages of an elaborate self-identification:

I am an invisible man. No, *I am not a spook* like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am *I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms*. *I am a man of substance*, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and *I might even be said to possess a mind*. *I am invisible, understand*, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though *I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass*.

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, opening lines

The adept use of almost alternating passive and active verbs in the opening of a book review tends to mirror the pattern of history being described: women *are often overlooked*, they *appear*, they *have been written about*, they *made a mark*, and so on.

Women are often overlooked in the writing of history, and they appear only seldom in the great sagas that have been written about the conquest and settlement of the West. Most women on the frontier were confined to home and farm, and companionship was limited to husbands, children and other women. But at least a few made a mark in their own lifetimes, only to disappear from the historical record.

Jonathan Kirsch, "Maverick minds, kindred spirits," R2

Again, below, alternation and passive verbs make for effective emphasis and cohesion:

We heard Killdeers last evening. Small Crested Flycatchers, Summer Yellow-birds, Maryland Yellow-throats, and House Wrens are seen as we pass along our route; while the Spotted Sandpiper accompanies us all along the river. Sparrow Hawks, Turkey Buzzards, Arctic Towhee Buntings, Cat-birds, Mallards, Coots, Gadwalls, King-birds, Yellow-breasted Chats, Red Thrushes, all are noted as we pass.

Jorie Graham, *Materialism*, 89

Why did author-scientist Isaac Asimov arraign his fellow scientists for their frequent use of the passive? Asimov accuses them of

interlarding every statement with a semiwithdrawal in the shape of a qualifying phrase, and then translating the whole into a grammatical construction peculiar to the scientific paper—the Impersonal Passive.

Isaac Asimov, *From Earth to Heaven*, vi

Asimov explains further in a note on the same page:

As an example of this inspiring form of writing I give you the solemn phrase, "It was earlier demonstrated by the investigator that—" Very few scientists are brave enough to dare to write, "I once showed that—"

Asimov, vi

Not all scientists write this way, of course. But it does happen:

It may possibly be thought strange that more has not been said in this book about the modern, very powerful techniques—various forms of chromatography and spectrometry, for example—now being increasingly applied, together with useful methods of statistical analysis, by a growing number of investigators to the study of olfaction. The value of all these procedures should certainly not be underestimated.

William McCartney, *Olfaction and Odours*, 190

Nor is it only scientists who write in the manner Asimov attacks. Besides its use by writers in many fields, it is found in committee prose—not addressed by one writer to prospective readers, but by a staff, some official body, an institution, corporation, government agency, or the like, to readers in whom it displays no personal interest. The impersonality, however chilling, is thus an accurate reflection of authorship, impersonal because collective—making a consensus prose for which responsibility would be as hard to fix actually as it is grammatically. There is indeed something mysterious and unnerving about the next icy official pronouncements:

It is hereby stipulated that coverage under this policy does not include damage caused in any manner by windstorm to paint or waterproofing material applied to the exterior of the building(s) or structure(s) covered hereunder. The value of paint or waterproofing material, being excluded from the coverage as above stated, shall not be considered in the determination of actual cash value when applying the Co-Insurance Clause applicable to loss from windstorm.

"Windstorm Exterior Paint and Waterproofing Exclusion Clause," an insurance company policy

A bachelor's degree in a broad program of general education, granted by a college or university of recognized standing, is normally requisite for admission, but is not sufficient

in itself. An examination of an applicant's academic record is made to determine whether he has established a strong affirmative case in regard to the character of his general education, and his fitness for graduate work in his proposed subject of study. Letters of recommendation from persons who are in a position to analyze the candidate's abilities and to estimate his promise are given very serious consideration. The results of the Graduate Record Examination are used as a supplementary objective check on the candidate's aptitudes and knowledge. In the consideration of applicants, regard is given to character and promise as well as to scholastic attainment. A personal interview is not required. If a candidate wishes to present himself for an interview or if he wishes to learn further about the program of study, he is welcomed...

A Graduate School Announcement

TO ALL REGISTRANTS:

When you report pursuant to this order you will be forwarded to an Armed Forces Examining Station where it will be determined whether you are qualified for military service under current standards. Upon completion of your examination, you will be returned to the place of reporting designated above. It is possible that you may be retained at the Examining Station for more than 1 day for the purpose of further testing or for medical consultation. You will be furnished transportation, and meals and lodging when necessary, from the place of reporting designated above to the Examining Station and return.

"Order to Report for Armed Forces Physical Examination," U. S. Selective Service System Form 223

There can be no doubt about these excerpts being officialese, and we can at least respond to them on these grounds—even though we hardly enjoy reading them. Yet we may still wish to object in the case of the middle one, the announcement from a university, and wonder if its composers might have avoided inflicting interested students with such a sense of anonymous cold authority. It would have been easy enough to substitute an inexact but warming "we" for the unspoken agent of all that momentous paperwork, serious consideration, and decision-making. And matters are not helped by eight uses of the old-fashioned generic pronouns.

In the account below, however, the impersonality of tone seems appropriate. With the exception of the opening impersonal passive "It will be remembered," the commentator presents us with a series of rapid actions, of orders and imprisonments and inquisitions assailing the defenseless Essex, and later Hayward and Wolfe, and recorded aptly by the passive grammar, with its submerged, threatening agency. The heavy passives give the actions the weight of history, conveying not just the threatening swift action of events but their gravity, lasting importance, and the power of almost invisible agents:

It will be remembered that when Essex made his tempestuous return from Ireland, against the queen's orders, in September of 1599, *he was suspected and remitted* to custody. On November 29, *censure was pronounced* on him in Star Chamber. In March *he was allowed* to return to his own house in charge of Sir Richard Berkeley. In June of 1600 *he was tried before special commissioners, censured, and ordered* to remain a prisoner in his house and not to execute any of his offices. Great stress *was laid* on Hayward's book during these proceedings as evidence of Essex's ambitions and intentions, and in July *Hayward was summoned to court and examined*. The printer Wolfe *was also questioned* and revealed that three weeks after the first printing of Hayward's book, the Archbishop of Canterbury had ordered the dedicatory epistle to Essex *cut out*. All later editions *were burnt* in the Bishop of London's house—to the financial grief of the printer, he complained. *Hayward was again examined*.

Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Histories*, 187

Syntax works in a thematic way also in these biographical notes about poet Ezra Pound, the passive receiver of the actions in a chain of events:

On May 3, 1945, Pound *was captured by Italian partisans and taken* to Genoa for interrogation by FBI agents; on May 24 *he was confined* in a military stockade, where *he was held* for nearly five months. *Flown* to Washington on November 18 and *reindicted for treason*... A jury found him to be of unsound mind and *he was committed* to St. Elizabeth's hospital...

American Poetry: The Twentieth Century, v. 1, 918

Below, this time in a novel, a matter-of-fact reportorial style, cryptic and objective, uses passives to suggest the impersonal workings of public justice:

In the early summer of 1902 John Barrington Ashley of Coaltown, a small mining center in southern Illinois, *was tried* for the murder of Breckenridge Lansing, also of Coaltown. *He was found guilty and sentenced* to death.

Thornton Wilder, *The Eighth Day*, 3

With these last examples we have returned from complaints against the passive to a discussion of what might be called making thematic capital of the implications carried by the passive voice. The results are remarkably varied, and a small further sampling will conclude this chapter. In the following passage, a superstitious heritage assumes some sort of divine command coming down through the ages as the agent behind rules and taboos:

There are the rules and the laws; *they are well made*. *It is forbidden* to cross the great river and look upon the place that was the place of the Gods—*this is most strictly forbidden*... *These things are forbidden—they have been forbidden* since the beginning of time.

Stephen Vincent Benét, "By the Waters of Babylon," 3

The agent of this passive is unexpressed, simply because it is unknown:

Passport kontrol! Somewhere down the train the words were barked.

Catherine Drinker Bowen, *Adventures of a Biographer*, 6

Aside from these matters of agency or its absence, there is another way in which the passive becomes thematic, having to do with the nature of passivity itself. In the next sentence, at the end of a long coordinate chain, the active verbs of motion culminate in a single passive form, emphasized by the following adverb and appropriate to a shift from active to passive conveyance:

They sailed and trailed and flew and raced and crawled and walked and *were carried*, finally, home.

John Knowles, *Indian Summer*, 4

The next paired clauses seem almost a study in transformation, analyzing the two sides of the same verbal coin—the contrast between active and passive predication and, in a given case, its moral implications:

It is men tormenting and killing a bull; it is a bull being tormented and killed.

Max Eastman, *Art and the Life of Action*, 90

Two near-kernels are now paired in another contrast, this time the humorous juxtaposition of two kinds of death, one active and the other passive:

In New York, I should die of stimulus. In Boston, I should be soothed to death.

Van Wyck Brooks, *A Chilmark Miscellany*, 9

Another paired contrast between active and passive involves what the author refers to as “the dynamic of reading and writing.” Here it is an active infinitive in contrast to a passive infinitive:

The writer by implicit contract with readers promises to interest them; they in turn tacitly agree to allow themselves to be interested.

Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom*, xi

A contrast between passive and active responses to the paranoia sometimes faced by aspiring writers is expressed by a teacher of writing by using passive verbs in the first clause and then using mainly active verbs in the advice that follows:

You can be defeated and disoriented by all these feelings, I tell them, or you can see the paranoia, for instance, as wonderful material. You can use it as the raw clay that you pull out of the river: surely one of your characters is riddled with it, and so in giving that person this particular quality, you get to use it, shape it into something true and funny or frightening.

Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, 11

A similar contrast, again a passive contrasted to an active, marks the sentence below:

It was the deep and enduring belief that people *be permitted to define* themselves, not just by gender but by ability, inclination, and character.

Anna Quindlen, *Loud and Clear*, 208

Death happens to be the subject of the next example, the description of a corpse. The passive structure renders a sense of action locked into the rigidity of death:

The body lay on the back, the head toward the door.

A candlestick *was yet clutched* in the right hand.

Robert Penn Warren, *Wilderness*, 228

One brief selection displays almost every kind of verb and verbal discussed in this chapter and illustrates the vitality of verbs in good prose. The vigorous active verbs, a dozen or more describing a player's on-stage physical actions, find a contrast in the closing lines that include passives (*a book made of* and *being read*) to portray the comparative quiet of reading and mental awareness. Carol Muske-Dukes, poet, novelist, critic, writes about actor David Dukes, her late husband.

He would play Hamlet, the Duke of Albany, Timon. He was Aubrey Beardsley, Teddy Roosevelt, Henry Carr. He leapt from a balcony in Dracula's cape, he fenced his way downstage, shouting, as Hotspur—he pedaled a bike onstage, walked on his hands, peeled an orange, sang a rhyming soliloquy, quoted Dada. He was a physical actor who had to observe carefully how the body moved; he was a cerebral actor who feared overthinking his parts. I think about his experience as an actor and believe in some eerie, proactive way it recreated the experience of reading, of being inside a book made of intense audience regard, being “read” as he acted—and conscious of that reading.

Carol Muske-Dukes, *Married to the Icepick Killer*, 173-174



Adjectives and Adverbs

Hot soup on a cold day, cold soup on a hot day, and the smell of soup simmering in the kitchen are fundamental, undoubtedly even atavistic, pleasures and solaces that give a special kind of satisfaction.

Julia Child and Simone Beck

Profound was Gary's relief the next morning as he bumped and glided, like a storm-battered yacht, into the safe harbor of his work week.

Jonathan Franzen

The cool globes of dew or rain broke in showers of iridescent spray about his nose; the earth, here hard, here soft, here hot, here cold, stung, traced, and tickled the soft pads of his feet.

Virginia Woolf

The limping earnestness of his speech disappeared; he talked as he drank, abundantly.

Desmond Hall

Your coloring words, particularly adjectives and adverbs, must be used where they will do the most good. Not every action needs a qualifying adverb, not every object needs a qualifying adjective. Your reader probably has a perfectly serviceable mental picture of a lion; when a lion comes into your story you need not burden him with adjectives unless it is necessary, for instance, to point out that he is a green lion, something of which your reader might not have a very vivid mental picture.

Shirley Jackson, *Come Along with Me*, 239-240

After a while, I find myself starting to feel hungry for an adverb...

Christopher Ricks, *Dylan's Visions of Sin*, 467

ADJECTIVES AND ADVERBS are "coloring words," but this is not to deny their importance or to suggest that their roles are somehow inferior to those of nouns and verbs. Often the noun and the verb simply state the known or given information, and it is the adjective or adverb that carries the news of the sentence.

Adjectives and adverbs offer to writers extraordinary resources and subtleties. Along with nouns and verbs, they are *content words*, the four word classes forming the great bulk of the vocabulary whose main job is to carry content or meaning. Although the inflected forms and the placements of content words give help in depicting the syntactic structure of sentences, that task is left mainly to the much smaller group

labeled *structure words* or *function words*—prepositions, conjunctions, determiners and the like, auxiliaries, some pronouns—only a few hundred all told but the most frequently used words in the language, words such as *a, an, the, this, that, my, and, to, on, but, for, can, has*, for example. The remarkable richness of English word classes, including adjectives and adverbs, and the ways they work ingeniously together in sentences invite creative variety, as seen in the examples that follow.

Adjectives and adverbs in short sentences

Sometimes in the *be* and linking verb equative patterns, the adjective is doubled or even further expanded, offering a significant enlargement of meaning:

The relationship is *disgraceful, disgusting*.
Janet Frame, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*, 194

The noise had been *so loud, so sharp*.
William Golding, *The Pyramid*, 4

My career at Fontlands was *short and inglorious*.
Havelock Ellis, *My Life*, 125

He sounded *weary, hurt*.
Bernard Malamud, *The Assistant*, 88

He felt *porous and pregnable*.
Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation of a Bezar*, 20

The lawn is *green and clean and quiet*.
Julia Alvarez, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent*, 85

What is clear is the tendency of the third slot, especially after *be* and linking verbs, to carry the *new* information of the sentence. When the adjective appears in front of nouns as part of other patterns, it is still often responsible for much of the new descriptive material. Here, in front of a noun complement in a *be* pattern, it is the adjective that carries the news and draws the stress:

But his life energy was *cheerful* stuff.
Iris Murdoch, *Bruno's Dream*, 19

You're a *patient* person.

Ann Beattie, "The Rabbit Hole as Likely Explanation," 70

Below in a sentence with a direct object, the modifier *another* draws emphasis equal to or exceeding that on the noun it precedes:

They started *another* war.

Rebecca Wells, *Little Altars Everywhere*, 169

Adjectives to make contrasts

In some of the preceding examples with adjectives used in pairs, at times the two adjectives are almost synonymous: *disgraceful, disgusting; loud, sharp; porous, pregnable*. Pairs of adjectives are also often used in various kinds of syntactic arrangements to establish contrasts:

Value judgments may be *informed or uninformed, responsible or irresponsible*.

Walter Kaufmann, *The Faith of a Heretic*, 335

An art critic makes subtle choices of descriptive adjectives, here including two differentiating pairs:

The visual system has a drive to perceive objects and so a built-in good will towards the pictorial enterprise, allowing liberties. The marks can be *selective or tendentious, coherent or fantastic* in the visual behaviour they demand and the experience the behaviour brings.

Michael Baxandall, *Words for Pictures*, 158

Below, after a neat braiding of a contrastive pair of adjectives and a pair of nouns, the authors also take advantage of a pair of adjectives similar to each other in meaning:

Hot soup on a *cold day*, *cold soup* on a *hot day*, and the smell of soup simmering in the kitchen are *fundamental*, undoubtedly even *atavistic*, pleasures and solaces that give a special kind of satisfaction.

Julia Child and Simone Beck, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, volume 2, 3

The mobility of adverbs

Adverbs have a place, an optional niche, at the end of any kernel. But they become the most mobile of all speech parts and are able to work in positions almost anywhere in the sentence. Beginning with adverbial openers, here are examples of some of the many positions:

Gently he stopped the machine.
Romain Gary, *Nothing Important Ever Dies*, 108

Slowly I tapped along the way. Obediently, I turned.
John Wain, *Death of the Hind Legs*, 73

Slowly, the sky blew up.
Philip Wylie, *The Answer*, 15

Outside, the darkness was total.
Brian Moore, *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*, 102

Next I moved the slate.
Rose Tremain, *The Way I Found Her*, 276

He was always two men.
Alan Paton, *Too Late the Phalarope*, 3

We come, then, to the question of art.
Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 82

All that life soon faded.
John Hersey, *Here to Stay*, 167

The two finally went on their way.... He moved slowly.
Rupa Bajwa, *The Sari Shop*, 3

Examples are everywhere. Also we often see adverbs as modifiers of adjectives, one of the adverb's most useful functions:

The man's face grew visibly paler.
Romain Gary, *Nothing Important Ever Dies*, 110

It was very hot and bright and the houses looked sharply white.
Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*, last page

The service was *fatiguingly* long.
John Updike, *Olinger Stories*, 160

Sometimes adverbs appear in pairs. Here each adverb is preceded by the intensifier "so," also an adverb:

She laughed so easily, so often.
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 85

Given the high mobility and flexibility of the adverb, how does a writer decide exactly where in the sentence it works best? Consider the placement of the adverb *unfortunately* in the following descriptions of linguists' attention to children's language learning:

The acquisition of complex sentences *unfortunately* has not received nearly as much attention as the acquisition of syntactic phenomena in simple sentences.

The acquisition of complex sentences has *unfortunately* not received...

The acquisition of complex sentences has not received, *unfortunately*, nearly as much...

The acquisition of complex sentences has not received nearly as much attention, *unfortunately*, ...

Unfortunately the acquisition of complex sentences has not received...

One need not find fault with any of the choices above. The decision would probably depend on what *sounds* best and fits best in relation to the sentences that precede and follow. The writers actually chose none of the above but wrote:

The acquisition of complex sentences has not received nearly as much attention as the acquisition of syntactic phenomena in simple sentences, *unfortunately*.

Robert D. Van Valin, Jr., and Randy J. LaPolla, *Syntax*, 646

The writers may have wanted to emphasize the adverb, or to link the idea to the sentence that followed. Adverbs are among the most useful devices for establishing cohesion.

The adverb in longer patterns

Like the single adverb, longer adverbial patterns are often extremely mobile. Next, adverbial phrases and subordinate clauses occupy various positions:

On the edge of the silted and sanded up Old Harbor, right where the Hawley dock had been, the stone foundation is still there.

John Steinbeck, *The Winter of Our Discontent*, 50

Often single adverbs—or adverbial phrases or clauses—serve admirably as sentence openers. It may be that as many as one-fourth of the sentences in English and American fiction begin with adverbial modifiers. At times opening adverbials join with others to create effective links from one sentence to another and establish a thematic unity as in this fictional passage about the boredom of a news writer:

When he was thirteen and a baseball zealot, his sister had ridiculed his interest in baseball games by saying, "They're all the same except for the score." At the time, the remark had seemed to him symbolic of her deep, feminine ignorance of what was truly important in life, but he later decided she had aptly described not only baseball games but also political campaigns. He found international affairs even more repetitious. Whenever he floated into the Foreign Affairs section, he always seemed to be writing a story he had written two or three times before, usually about Cyprus. For a while, he considered the possibility that the Greeks and Turks on Cyprus had some way of knowing when he was going to be assigned to Foreign Affairs. All over the island people would say, "He's there! He's there!" in Greek or Turkish, a signal for everyone to haul out the bombs and Bren guns for yet another chapter of the dreary conflict—absolutely indistinguishable from the chapter he had dealt with a year before.

Calvin Trillin, *Floater*, 25

Adjectives and adverbs in isolated positions

As adjectives and adverbs take up their positions, as they are arranged, developed, or expanded, they answer such questions as "Which one?" "What kind?" "How?" "When?" "Where?" and many more. The information they bring, ready to arrive at almost any point in a sentence, often makes its appearance marked by commas. Both adjectives and adverbs may be isolated this way in free positions for particular emphasis, set off by punctuation. Adjectives thus deployed are often what are called appositional adjectives, discussed in chapter 10. However they are classified, their impact in a given sentence may be considerable. Here, for instance, what remains most forcibly with us is the highlighted adjective at the end:

I care about that moment which was true and inspiring.
I saw it only a few seconds, but it will remain with me,
imperishable.

Henry Miller, *Henry Miller on Writing*, 123

And the terse *dead* abruptly closes this sentence with appropriate finality:

A few minutes later he slumped from his chair, *dead.*

Jerry Allen, *The Thunder and the Sunshine*, 238

In this isolated use, as elsewhere, past and present participles are often found working as adjectives, and with adjectives. Below, the sentence itself appears fixed by the last past participle:

Onlookers young and old line the curb, *transfixed.*

Sidney Petrie, *What Modern Hypnotism Can Do for You*, 11

Here the present participial phrase interrupts the sentence just as the building it modifies interrupts the described view:

Our living room looked out across a small back yard to a rough stone wall to an apartment building which, *towering above*, caught every passing thoroughfare sound and rifled it straight down to me.

Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 187

Participles and pure adjectives are used in similar ways:

The lamp had been standing cobwebbed in a corner, *unplugged*.

John Updike, *Of the Farm*, 27

He thought of crawling under his bed and hanging onto one of the legs but the three boys only stood there, *speckled and silent, waiting*, and after a second he followed them a little distance out on the porch and around the corner of the house... He stopped a few feet from the pen and waited, *pale but dogged*.

Flannery O'Connor, "The River," 35

Early in the afternoon on Christmas, after a good meal with Paul Smith, pastor of St. Monica's, Great Plains, Father Urban got on the train for Duesterhaus, *tired*.

J. F. Powers, *Morte d'Urban*, 90

The moon had passed behind a cloud and the water looked dark and malevolent, *terribly deep*.

Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead*, 13

Troops of grimed and burly laborers, a few women among them, ran hither and thither, *toiling, cursing*.

John Barth, *Giles Goat-Boy*, 177

Here is a long participial sentence opener that might be labeled "dangling modifier" if it appeared in a student paper. In such a sentence the participial phrase needs to have handy the noun that it modifies, and that is not the case here:

Having rarely, so far as is known, given a penny to a cause for a charity, indifferent to the improvement of others while preoccupied with the improvement of himself, it never came into Holmes's head to contribute to the usefulness of an institution.

Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore*, 796

To get rid of the dangler, the last part of the sentence, after *himself*, might be rewritten: *Holmes never thought about contributing to the usefulness of an institution.*

Now here are isolated adverb modifiers:

From mind the impetus came and through mind my course was set, and therefore nothing on earth could really surprise me, *utterly*.

Saul Bellow, *Henderson the Rain King*, 156

We have a variety of answers, most of them probably right for some god, *somewhere*.

Mary Barnard, *The Mythmakers*, 90

Every once in a while, and *faintly*, the wind moves the airplane on its landing gear struts.

Richard Bach, *Stranger to the Ground*, 34

She held the paper bag containing two bottles close to her side, *a little furtively*.

William Van O'Connor, *Campus on the River*, 54

This is not how Dostoevsky meant, *intellectually*, for the history of Myshkin to come out, but it is how, *imaginatively*, it had to come out.

R. P. Blackmur, "The Idiot: A Rage of Goodness," 142

Perhaps they reminded me, *distantly*, of myself, *long ago*. Perhaps they reminded me, *dimly*, of something we had lost.

James Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, 480

Adjectives and adverbs in inverted position

The process of inversion can also bring about the front-shifted emphasis of isolated adjectival and adverbial phrases. Adjectival phrases open the first two examples, below; an adverbial phrase opens the last one:

Profound was Gary's relief the next morning as he bumped and glided, like a storm-battered yacht, into the safe harbor of his work week.

Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*, 201

Looming, ubiquitous are the dangers of prodigality, of valuing change just for its own sake, of destroying the basic elements that give significance to living.

Richard G. Lillard, *Eden in Jeopardy*, vi

Outside the lounge could now be heard the rhythmic crunch of steel-tipped boots and the bellow of the commands.

David Walder, *The Gift Bearers*, 69

Catalogs of modifiers

A catalog of adjectives opens the next sentence:

Diligent, well-meaning, oppressed, loyal, affectionate, and patriotic, this princess is not yet corrupted by her questionable powers.

Michael Dobson and Nicola J. Watson, *England's Elizabeth*, 172

Here is another list of adjectives—marked off by dashes—in the middle of a sentence:

He was my sister Mimi's crazy husband, a mystical child of darkness—*blatantly ambitious, lovable, impossible, charming, obnoxious, tirelessly active*—a bright, talented, sheepish, tricky, curly-haired man-child of darkness.

Joan Baez, "Foreword," vii

An opposite technique to the careful placement and demarcation of isolated adjectives is the deliberate piling up of a number of modifiers immediately in front of a headword as in the first example or as predicates after *he* in the second:

Whereas the truth was, as he alone knew, that the heavens were a *glorious blazing golden limitless* cathedral of unending and eternal light...

John Knowles, *Indian Summer*, 27

Everything he writes is written as an *angry, passionate, generous, fumbling, rebellious, bewildered and bewildering* man.

Sean O'Faolain, *The Vanishing Hero*, 108

In the following excerpt, the biographer uses a catalog of adjectives at the end of the sentence to contrast with adjectivals used earlier in the sentence:

It is one of the peculiarities of her posthumous reputation that the full, immense extent of her life's work has only revealed itself gradually, changing the twentieth-century perception of her from the delicate lady authoress of a few experimental novels and sketches, some essays and a "writer's" diary, to one of the most *professional, perfectionist, energetic, courageous*, and *committed* writers in the language.

Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 4

In a short conversation, an author who consistently makes effective use of adjectives relies on fourteen adjectival and participial forms:

"That Sengupta, I swear," Sorava went on. "What a *skinny, scrawny, sniveling, driveling, mingy, stingy, measly, weaselly* clerk! As far as I'm concerned he's *finished with, done for, gone for good*."

"*Khattam-shud*," Haroun said quietly.

"That's *right*," his mother answered. "I promise. Mr. Sengupta is *khattam-shud*."

Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, 210

The result of such insistent modification, such an emphatic welter of description, is often highly charged and emotive. A similar result may come from groups of hyphenated modifiers mixing noun and adjective forms:

Analyzing the comedian's problem in this new business, it seemed to me that the *bizarre-garbed, joke-telling* funster was ogling extinction.

Fred Allen, *Treadmill to Oblivion*, 5

He loved *hitherto-unthought-of, thereafter-unthinkable* combinations of instruments.

Randall Jarrell, *Pictures from an Institution*, 136

In an unusual arrangement, a catalog of mostly adjective modifiers is punctuated as a sentence fragment and artfully inserted between two short sentences. Syntactically, it might be attached to the preceding sentence but, punctuated as it is, its meaning looks both backward and forward:

My daughter arrived. *Smart, sensitive, cheerful, at school most of the day, but quick with tea and sympathy on her return.*
My characters adored her.

Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, 359

The importance of a discerning and versatile handling of adjectives and adverbs is apparent. When properly chosen and located, these parts of speech are able to clarify, qualify, or intensify an idea. But they cannot save a bad idea. Unnecessary modification can even disable some words that look vigorous standing on their own.

Adjectival color and clarity

The following sentences demonstrate successful paragraphs that are heavily adjectival, highly colored. They are attractive and colorful but selective, because their adjectives have all been chosen, assigned, and fastened together with attention to rhythm, clarity, impact, and focus.

Father Urban, *fifty-four, tall and handsome but a trifle loose in the jowls and red of eye*, smiled and put out his hand.

J. F. Powers, *Morte d'Urban*, 17

In the *somber* background, a *single, stark, leafless* tree spreads *gnarled* branches atop a *dark, volcano-shaped* hill. The image is *emblematic* of Petrina's reading, her re-presentation, of Milton's epic. Of all Milton's *visual* interpreters, Petrina is the artist for whom Paradise is most decisively and tragically *lost*.

Wendy Furman and Virginia Tufte, "Metaphysical Tears: Carlotta Petrina's Re-Presentation of Paradise Lost, Book ix," 86

They were standing in a *large, circular* room. Everything in here was *black* including the floor and ceiling—*identical, unmarked, handle-less black* doors were set at intervals all around the *black* walls, interspersed with branches of candles whose flames turned *blue*, their *cool shimmering* light reflected in the *shining* marble floor so that it looked as though there was *dark* water underfoot.

J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, 770

He lifted his *heavy* eyes and saw leaning over him a *huge* willow-tree, *old* and *hoary*. *Enormous* it looked, its *sprawling* branches going up like *reaching* arms with many *long-fingered* hands, its *knotted* and *twisted* trunk *gaping* in wide fissures that creaked faintly as the boughs moved.

J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 127

He had a *momentary, scared* glimpse of their faces, *thin and unnaturally long*, with *long, drooping* noses and *drooping* mouths of *half-spherical, half-idiotic* solemnity.

C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 44

Adjectives in the next example are perfectly selected to help give a human view of sensory perceptions attributed to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel:

The *cool* globes of dew or rain broke in showers of *iridescent* spray about his nose; the earth, here *hard*, here *soft*, here *hot*, here *cold*, stung, traced, and tickled the *soft* pads of his feet.

Virginia Woolf, *Flush: A Biography*, 12

And here, an author brilliantly combines usual and unusual adjectives, precisely applicable, with past participles, nouns and metaphors:

Dr. Harvey greeted me at the door in a red-and-white plaid shirt and a thin, solid-blue Pendleton tie that still bore a mildewy \$10 price tag from some earlier decade. His face was blowsy and peckled, runneled with lines, though he didn't quite seem his eighty-four years. He had an eagle nose, alert eyes, and stubbed yellow teeth. His white hair was as fine as corn silk and shifted with the November wind over the bald patches on his head.

Michael Paterniti, *Driving Mr. Albert*, x

Next a series of three forceful adjectives is emphatically deployed after a participial phrase; there follows a sequence of participial phrases that add detail to scene and characterization, helped by a pair of bound appositive adjectives:

There she was, walking down the street along the windowsill, step by step, *stout, safe, confident*, buried in her errands, clutching her handbag, stepping aside from the common women *blind* and *heavy* under a week's provisions, prying into the looking-glasses at the doors of furniture shops.

Dylan Thomas, *Adventures in the Skin Trade*, 5

In the sentences below, a well-chosen adjective in front of almost every noun helps to create the emphatic rhythms, vigor, and persuasiveness of the author's tribute to Martin Luther:

Luther's *audacious* declaration initiated a *religious* movement and *intellectual* current of which we are a part 463 years later. His *penetrating theological* critique of the *existing* order and his *persistent* resistance against the *prevailing religious* hierarchy exposed a *decadent* Christianity and *corrupt* church.

Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments*, 258

From the same paragraph, another sentence further demonstrates this insistent adjectival style:

Never before or after has a *biblical* professor in a university performed such *prophetic* gestures of *gargantuan* proportions, nor has a *traditional* intellectual engaged in *organic* activity with such *astounding* results.

West, 258

Below, adjectives combine with adjectivals including present and past participles and nouns. Adverbial intensifiers—*less, downright, wonderfully*—add to the lively assortment:

The *first hundred* pages of the book constitute a *dense* but *sparkling* digest of *key* ideas on soul, flesh, mind, death and the afterlife—a *jet* flight through *Western* philosophy from Plato to Locke that takes in the *familiar* (*Platonic forms*), the

less familiar (the *Hippocratic* theory of humors) and the downright *esoteric* (the iatrochemistry of Joannes Baptista van Helmont). Happily, Porter was a wonderfully *gifted* explicator of all that is *abstruse* and *difficult*. Even so, this is not a section to read while *sleep-deprived* or *suffering* from a *crashing* hangover.

Andrew Miller, "Losing Their Religion," 11

On the same page, Miller makes apt choices of adjectives in the objective complement *thinkable* and the modifier *robust*:

Sapere aude ("Dare to be wise"), the Enlightenment battle cry, made, little by little, everything thinkable. "Should free inquiry lead to the destruction of Christianity itself," the dissenting minister Joseph Priestley declared in the robust style of the times, "it ought not, on that account, to be discontinued."

Miller, 11

Here is a rather elevated though frequent adjectival formation, the adjective plus dependent prepositional phrase:

They come to him *murmurous with imaginative overtones, heavy with evocative memories*...

Lord David Cecil, *The Fine Art of Reading*, 282

It can be used less formally:

Sometimes his face swelled *purple with anger*, and he pounded on the door till he was sobbing with exertion.

Doris Lessing, *In Pursuit of the English*, 173

Dan was *restless with suppressed belligerence*.

Lessing, 184

A mood is articulated in a pattern that uses the same adjective five times:

It was a *good* peace, that spread. Those were *good* leaves up there, with a *good*, bright sky beyond them. This was a *good* earth beneath my back, soft as a bed, and in all its unexamined depths was a *good* darkness.

William Golding, *The Pyramid*, 56

Adjectival styles often succeed in nonfiction descriptions of first-hand experience. A cellist calls on adjectives (and adverbs as well) to answer the question, "How do the members of a string quartet play together and tour together year in and year out, without killing each other?" Below, the adjectives are italicized, but it is worth noting also the acuteness of the adverbs, among them *destructively*, *harshly*, *personally*, *ferociously*:

Conversely, there is a danger that *individual* criticisms can become destructively *hurtful* and *bitter*. If they are voiced too harshly and personally, no one ends up in a *fit* state to play. After all, the *deep* feelings conjured up when we play *great* music already make us feel *vulnerable*. In addition, nearly all playing requires *maximum* self-confidence and *complete physical* ease and relaxation, even (or especially) in music of *great* intensity and ardour, or that is *rapturous* or *celebratory*. So suggestions or criticisms ferociously barked at a colleague with an anger bordering on hatred, or with *withering* contempt, are likely to be *counterproductive*, and are bound to be avoided—something that is not always easy.

David Waterman, "Four's a Crowd," CI

Adverbial energy and rhythm

Adverbs are often used to modify the adjectives, and they become an important part of the rhythm of adjectival styles. There are also what might be called adverbial styles, sentences in which much of the content, much of the interest, or perhaps the real punch, ends up with the adverbs:

It was *lightly*, yes. But it was *not briskly*, it was *not very fast*.
Mark Van Doren, "The Watchman," 75

If he said he had written a fairy-story with a political purpose, we cannot *lightly* suppose he spoke *lightly*.
C. M. Woodhouse, "Introduction," IX

He drank *eagerly*, *copiously*... The limping earnestness of his speech disappeared; he talked as he drank, *abundantly*.
Desmond Hall, *I Give You Oscar Wilde*, 139

So one day he *silently* and *suddenly* killed her.
D. H. Lawrence, *Etruscan Places*, 198

Lightning spit *all around him*; rain cut *in at his face*; thunder crashed *against his eardrums*. Another bolt of lightning, *closer*. Then another, *closer still*.

Clay looked *up, straight, right up into the sky*.
William Goldman, *Soldier in the Rain*, 308

It was *always* going to be like this, *always, always*.
John Wain, *A Travelling Woman*, 47

Here, from the same book, a paragraph moves into adverbial fragments:

He stopped *in amazement*. She was laughing. *Not mockingly, or with the effect of covering up other emotions she might otherwise betray. Simply laughing, unaffectedly, from sheer amusement*.
Wain, 47

Intensifiers and qualifiers

All the adverbs just gathered live up to the nickname they share with adjectives as "coloring words." But there is a particular case against a particular kind of adverb. Listen to the objections expressed by a poet and essayist. She names some of the worst offenders:

With regard to unwarinesses that defeat precision, excess is the common substitute for energy. We have it in our semi-academic, too conscious adverbs—awfully, terribly, frightfully, infinitely, tremendously...
Marianne Moore, *Predilections*, 9

Below energy has succumbed to excess:

It is obvious that people dwelling upon a treeless and *often absolutely* vegetationless coast would turn to the sea for their food and for other necessities.
Ivan T. Sanderson, *Follow the Whale*, 33

An excess of adverbs, especially if they end in *-ly*, can at times set up an unintended rhythm, as in the following sentence. One can easily remove them:

The essays pioneered an *entirely* new model of communication (one that *apparently* defies traditional rhetoric) that we have not *culturally* assimilated and that makes Emerson so *intellectually* refreshing and so worth reading still.

Robert Atwan, *The Best American Essays*, xi

In this classic scene from *Lucky Jim*, shifts in modifiers parody the style and indicate the futility of a student paper:

It was a perfect title, in that it crystallized the article's niggling mindlessness, its funeral parade of yawn-enforcing facts, the pseudo-light it threw upon non-problems. Dixon had read, or begun to read, dozens like it, but his own seemed worse than most in its air of being convinced of its own usefulness and significance. "In considering this strangely neglected topic," it began. This what neglected topic? This strangely what topic? This strangely neglected what? His thinking all this without having defiled and set fire to the typescript only made him appear to himself as more of a hypocrite and fool. "Let's see," he echoed Welch in a pretended effort of memory: "Oh, yes; *The economic influence of the developments in shipbuilding techniques, 1450 to 1485.*"

Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim*, 16

Adverbs as cohesive devices

The mobility of the adverb can help hold sentences together. An adverb at the beginning of a sentence can tie it to the preceding sentence:

He recognized the feeling. *After that*, he recognized the man.

Wright Morris, *The Field of Vision*, 16

There! Out it boomed. *First* a warning, musical; *then* the hour, irrevocable.

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 5

There fear stiffened into hatred. *Here* hatred curdled from despair.

Phillip Toynbee, *Prothalamium*, 67

Adjectives in adverb roles

Adjectives sometimes encroach on adverb territory for particular effect. A brief selection will show the informal, sometimes colloquial, sometimes intensified, results of a functional shift that puts adjectives where adverbs would be expected:

The trunk and the branches and the twigs were *terrible* black.

William Golding, *Pincher Martin*, 177

They stayed indoors till the colliers were all gone home, till it was *thick* dark, and the street would be deserted.

D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, 76

It was *full* dark now, but still early...

James Agee, *A Death in the Family*, 19

These last examples remind writers that our language is richly flexible, responsive to innovative molding by skilled hands. Adjectives and adverbs are prime materials for experimenting.