



Lesson 2.1

Organization's a Joke

Just kidding. But they do have something in common. Order and timing are everything when you're telling a joke. You have to set it up, tell enough so the joke makes sense, then end with a zinger. It doesn't work to put the punch line right up front and then say, "Oops! Pretend I didn't get to that part yet!" Good writing follows a similar sequence. It opens with a strong lead, expands the main idea in the middle, and ends with a zinger: the conclusion. There's an art to telling a joke well. And there's an art to sequencing information in writing.

Sharing an Example: *Moby Dick*

In his novel *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville tells the story of Captain Ahab's bloodthirsty obsession with killing the tremendous white whale. In the following passage, Ahab paces the quarter-deck as he eyes his men. As you read, notice how Melville *sequences* the dialogue, making his message clearer with every sentence.

Vehemently pausing, he cried— "What do ye do when ye see a whale, men?"

"Sing out for him!" was the impulsive rejoinder from a score of voices.

"Good!" cried Ahab, with a wild approval in his tones; observing the hearty animation into which his unexpected question had so magnetically thrown them.



“And what do ye next, men?”
 “Lower away, and after him!”
 “And what tune is it ye pull to, men?”
 “A dead whale or a [sunken] boat!”

Moby Dick
 by Herman Melville

Quick Reflection

Take a moment to think about the passage you just read. What is the big idea the author wants readers to take away from this passage?

What If . . .

What if the author had been a little careless about sequence? Let’s say he wrote in a hurry—or didn’t go back to reread what he had written. In that case, his writing might have looked more like the following passage. This version has one sentence out of sequence—and it’s missing another. *Without looking back*, underline the out-of-order sentence and draw an arrow to show where it should go. Insert a caret (^) to show where a sentence is missing.

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 “And what tune is it ye pull to, men?”

Quick Reflection

How easy was it for you, as a reader, to notice when something was missing or out of place?

- It was VERY easy! The problems leaped right out at me!
- It was pretty easy—but I had to read the passage several times.
- It was impossible. In fact, the second version sounded just fine to me.

Playing with Order

This writer struggled with order—then finally gave up and cut his whole story apart into nine sentence strips. Read everything carefully—more than once. Then, with a partner (or in a writing circle), number the sentences in an order you think makes sense—and tells a good story. Remember the sequence of a well-timed joke: set-up, expansion, punch line.

- _____ Strays often show up during winter when the ground is covered with snow and hunting gets tough.
- _____ Honey Pie, as my grandma named her, now sleeps by the wood stove.
- _____ I say lucky because my grandma has a soft spot in her heart for lonely strays—especially when the snow is two feet thick.
- _____ Most of them are old or injured.
- _____ This is not unusual.
- _____ We always visit them during the holidays.



Name

Date

- _____ Last year, about a week before our visit, a stray calico took up residence inside the horse barn.
- _____ This particular stray was no more than a kitten—a very lucky one at that.
- _____ My grandparents live on an 80-acre farm just outside Spokane.



Taking One More Look

The two most important parts of a joke are the opening line and the punch line. And as it turns out, beginnings and endings are critical to most writing. Take another look at the sentence you identified as the lead (#1) for the story about the stray kitten. Write a stronger version here—one that will really get your reader hooked:

Now, take another look at the sentence you identified as the conclusion (#9). Write an even more satisfying version here—one that leaves a lingering thought or image in the reader's mind:



Share and Compare

When you've finished your revisions, read the whole story aloud, including your revisions, with a partner or in a writing circle. Does everything make sense? Assess your work using this list:

- I set up my story with a strong lead that will hook readers.
- I put every sentence into a sequence that makes sense.
- I ended with a conclusion that will leave readers thinking—or give them something to remember.



A Writer's Questions

In this lesson, you had all of the sentences needed to create a story. Could there be more than one right way to arrange them? How so? Do you think good writers look for various possible ways to sequence information?



Putting It to the Test

When you're taking a writing test, you won't have time to take sentences apart and play with the order—obviously! But is there a little planning trick you could use to help you put things in an order that's at least logical?