Topic and stress position

Topic position: Beginning of a sentence

Should state what a sentence is about.

Stress position: End of a syntactic unit

Has the most emphasis, and should therefore state the most important piece of information.

In the topic position, your reader

- hopes to get a sense of where the sentence (or paragraph, section, document) is heading.

- looks to find a connection to something she knows already.

The wrong material in the topic position leaves the reader confused.

Example:

First proposed more than 30 years ago, systems to harvest utility-scale electrical power from ocean waves have recently been gaining momentum as a viable technology.

A possible revision?

Systems to harvest utility-scale electrical power from ocean waves, first proposed more than 30 years ago, have recently been gaining momentum as a viable technology.

- What has improved?
- What has not or has gotten worse?

Whatever is in the stress position receives the most emphasis.

Example:

- Bears eat salmon in the summer.

- Bears, in the summer, eat salmon.

What is the difference between these two sentences?

Another revision

A thirty-year old technology is gaining momentum as a viable source of alternative energy. This technology harvests utility-scale electrical power from ocean waves.

Paragraphs flow well if the material in the topic positions tends to link back to previous sentences.

Example:

Shiqiang Wan and his collaborators at the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Institute of Botany in Beijing set up 36 experimental plots on an Inner Mongolian steppe. They warmed some plots only during the day, others during night-time hours only, and yet others around the clock.

Plots warmed only at night turned the steppe from a net carbon source to a net carbon sink; the extra warming overnight stimulated respiration rates, boosting the plants' daytime rate of photosynthesis and so their uptake of carbon dioxide. The effects of separate day- or night-time warming did not add up to equal the effects observed at constantly warmed plots.

Logical gaps arise when the author takes old information for granted.

Warning sign: A lot of new information in a sentence is not used in following sentences.

Example:

For at least four decades, the field of psychoimmunology has attracted numerous investigators based on diverse hints linking the immune system to emotional behavior. The administration of cytokines for the treatment of various diseases is often associated with depression, which frequently accompanies autoimmune disease.

(Opening sentences of Snyder, PNAS 108:8923, 2011)