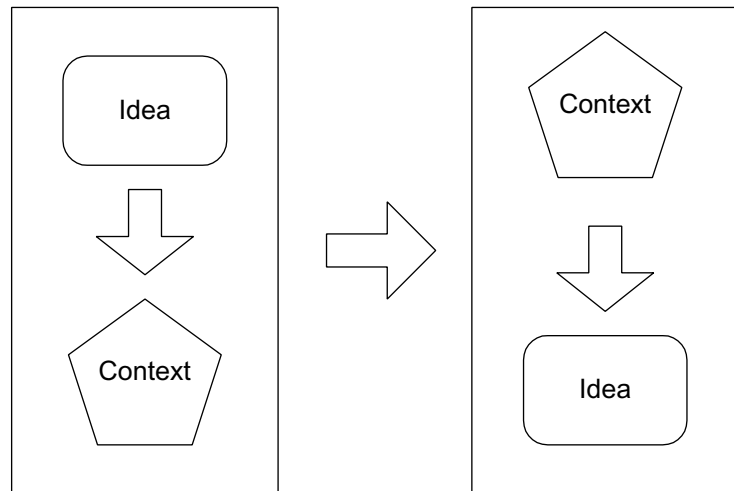


If You Must Include the Context, Put That First



BACKGROUND |

Connect the dots

As you write, proceeding from one sentence to another within a paragraph, or from one paragraph to another, you may need to signal the way you are organizing the sequence—how one idea follows from another. If so, slip the logical connection in quickly, starting the sentence (or paragraph) with words like:

- *Also*
- *Therefore*
- *Next*
- *For example*
- *As a result*
- *In conclusion*

Words like these will answer the question, “What’s the connection between what I just read, and this new information?”

You are stressing the way you are organizing the sequence of ideas by:

- Adding one to another (*plus, in addition, moreover*)

- Moving forward in time (*then, last*)
- Enumerating a sequence (*first, second, third*)
- Comparing or contrasting (*similarly, by contrast*)
- Tracing causes (*thus, as a result*)
- Explaining (*in other words*)
- Summarizing (*in short*)

Quick phrases like these clarify the relationship between one sentence and the next, between one paragraph and the next.

Point back to earlier ideas

Even though you are eager to get to your next idea, you may need to start off by reminding your readers of an idea you mentioned earlier, just to set the context.

*Be not the first by whom the new
are tried,*

Nor yet the last to lay the old aside.
—Alexander Pope,
An Essay on Criticism

Give your readers a familiar context to help them move from the more familiar to the less familiar, from the known to the unknown. (Williams, 1990).

If you fear your users may not grasp how one sentence flows out of the previous one, or how one paragraph follows another, begin with a reminder of old or familiar information, echoing words you used in the previous sentence or paragraph.

If you follow this given-new order, research shows that your users will:

- Process the new sentences more quickly than sentences that do not hark back to ideas mentioned earlier. (Albrecht and O'Brien, 1993; Suh and Trabasso, 1993)
- Remember the ideas more often. (Trabasso and van den Broek, 1985)
- Retain the new information longer. (Clark and Haviland, 1977; Just and Carpenter, 1980)
- View the sequence as relatively coherent. (Spyridakis, 2000)

Drop transitions that refer to missing text

Because you cannot tell where people come from, avoid starting a page with generalizations such as, “As we have seen,” or,

“Following up on that thought... .”

Your context is only as large as your current page. If you fear some people will not understand the topic or may not share your assumptions, create another page of background and link to it early in the paragraph, so people who want the context can go find it, while others, who could care less, can skip past the link.

EXAMPLES

Before

As we have just seen in our page about problem hair, long tresses can pull thin or fine hair down, revealing almost-bare patches. Get a short haircut, if your hair is just naturally fine, or you will have areas where your hair is thinning out. Add **volume** to each shaft of hair, too.

Before

Meet smooth, **progressive resistance**, as you go “uphill,” or increase the difficulty level.

We use a special **hydraulic turbine**, which has none of the noise of a fan trainer. TV or music will get through now. Our very large flywheel makes your cadence **even and fluid**, too. To make indoor training fun, drop your bike onto our solid steel frame, and pedal away.

Order our [Indoor Trainer](#). It makes your workout way cool.

After

If your hair is just naturally fine, or you have areas where your hair is thinning out, get a **short haircut**. Long tresses can pull the hair down, revealing the almost-bare patches. Next, add **volume** to each shaft of hair so each hair looks thicker and stays in place all day.

After

To make indoor training fun, drop your bike onto our solid steel frame and pedal away. Your bike’s wheels meet smooth, **progressive resistance**, as you go “uphill,” or increase the difficulty level.

The resistance comes from our special **hydraulic turbine**, which has none of the noise of a fan trainer. Our **silent** trainer always lets you hear the TV or music as you work out.

As you pedal, your cadence will be **even and fluid**, too, because we use a very large flywheel, so you don’t feel any hurried shifts or jerks. Our Indoor Trainer makes your work out way cool.

Order our [Indoor Trainer](#).

Before

Earthquake supplies

Get a space heater or wood-burning stove, and plenty of fuel, plus fire starters such as matches. Store blankets and sleeping bags, and many layers of warm clothing, in case the power and gas lines are out. If the earthquake destroys your house, you'll need shelter, so get a tent rated for the worst weather in your area (winter storms, summer heat), large enough for your whole family.

After

Be prepared for an earthquake.

If the earthquake **destroys your house**, you'll need shelter, so get a tent large enough for your whole family.

- The tent should be rated for the worst weather in your area (winter storms, summer heat).
- To heat your tent, get a space heater or wood-burning stove, and plenty of fuel, plus fire starters such as matches.

If your **house is OK**, but the power and gas lines are out, you need a way to keep warm.

- For comfortable warmth while sleeping, store blankets and sleeping bags.
- To stay comfortable during the day, prepare many layers of warm clothing, including thermal underwear.

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

People want lush context, not less. They enjoy spotting several themes operating within a paragraph or article. Just make sure you highlight your idea within the forest.

TO LEARN

People learn better when the teacher starts with the familiar, and moves to the unfamiliar. Same here.

TO ACT

In instructions, assume people have done the previous step. That's the main context. At the start of a step, limit yourself to saying where to operate, or why—briefly.

TO BE AWARE

All is context, no?

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

Keep the context-setting to a minimum. Like a person who takes forever to set up a joke, you may bore people if you lose yourself in setting the scene or laying out your rationale before you ever get to the point.

See: Albrecht and O'Brien (1993), Clark and Haviland (1977), Just and Carpenter (1980), Spyridakis (2000), Suh and Trabasso (1993), Trabasso and van den Broek (1985), Walker (1987), Williams (1990).

For your review only.

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