Reduce the Number of Clauses Per Sentence
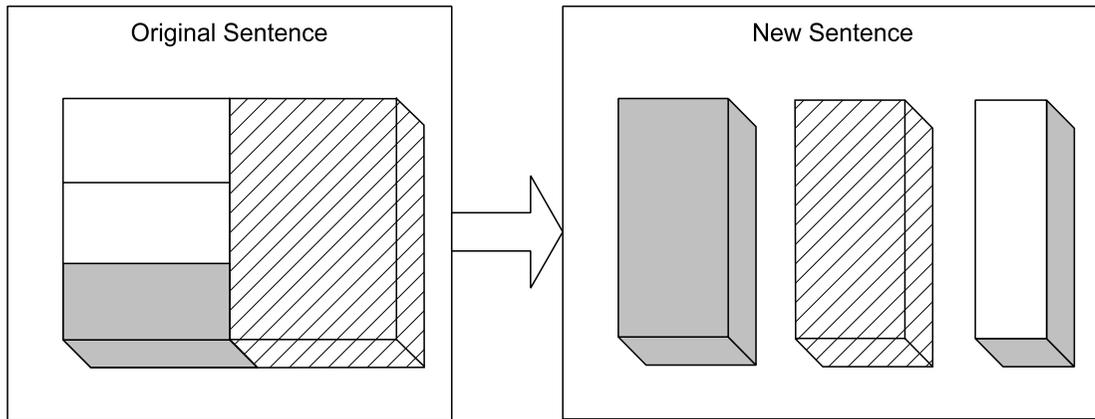
A clause is a miniature sentence, because it contains a subject and a verb.

—Robert Osgood

Move or remove *that*, *who*, and *which* clauses

Using a *that, who,* or *which* clause lets you embed one idea inside another—and that's excellent. Embedding a small sentence inside a larger one lets you show what is important and what is not, emphasizing one thing, demoting another, while extending the reach of your accumulating sentence so that it expresses a complex thought. But when you go too far, you have to learn to disembed sentences.

Don't let minisentences crop up right in the middle of your main sentence. When readers are moving along nicely in a sentence, but encounter a clause starting with *that, who,* or *which* right in the middle, gosh, they space out, make mistakes in understanding, and fail to recall the information inside those relative clauses.

Complex syntax distracts the user from the task and taxes his or her memory. (Horton, 1990)

Remember that the matter of wordiness is entirely secondary to the matter of how your sentence sounds. When longer phrases suit the rhythm of a sentence better than short ones, the longer ones are a better choice.

—Webster's Dictionary of English Usage

Readers seem to be built to understand one idea at a time. They get confused when they think they have grasped the general subject of a sentence, but then hear something different. Now they must hold the original thought in reserve, while contemplating a new, smaller idea, after which they must remember the original subject and apply that to the verb that emerges, just to understand who does what. So don't let the relative clauses get between the real subject and the real verb.

Strategies to handle a clause standing between a subject and a verb are:

- **Remove** the clause altogether and turn it into a separate sentence. The risk: sounding a little dumb.
- **Transform** the clause into an introductory *if* or *when* clause.
- **Move** the clause to the end of the sentence, where people can digest it because better it no longer distracts from the flow of the main sentence.

EXAMPLES

Before

Some customers, who have already been identified by our system as repeat customers, may want to see their wish list on the first page. The preferences that they chose earlier must be recognized, too, and acted on, by the content management system.

After

Our system identifies repeat customers. They may want to see their wish list on the first page. Also, our content management system ought to act on the preferences that these customers set earlier.

Before

Now you can shop for the same items that you always liked in our paper catalog, on the Web, using our online shopping service.

After

Now you can shop online for the same items that you always liked in our paper catalog.

Before

Of all the areas of uncertainty that an asthma sufferer encounters in the research literature that has developed over the years, as pharmaceutical companies and the National Science Foundation (NSF)

After

Does the flu vaccine cause asthma attacks? We don't know, despite extensive research by pharmaceutical companies and the National Science Foundation (NSF).

invest in clinical studies as to the effect of influenza vaccinations on asthma, no question that scientists address seems as difficult to resolve as the concern that the vaccine may actually cause asthma attacks.

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AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...	How well does this guideline apply?
TO HAVE FUN	Keeping it simple, stupid, or KISS, was developed as a guideline for business correspondence, not entertaining prose. You can play around with this rule, if you know you're amusing.
TO LEARN	One idea at a time works best. Disembed, move, or remove.
TO ACT	One meaningful action per instruction. No more. No extra explanations, either. Just the action.
TO BE AWARE	If you have something profound to say, it will come out simply. On the other hand, if you are selling a cult, use more clauses, because they act like incense smoke, to blind and ensnare.
TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE	Would you use complicated syntax when talking to a friend? Probably not, unless you were pontificating—or lying.

See: Bush and Campbell (1995), Creaghead and Donnelly (1982), Galitz (1985), Heckel (1984), Horton (1990), Isakson and Spyridakis (1999), Kilian (1999), Larkin and Burns (1977), Lynch and Horton (1997), Rayner, Carlson, and Frazier (1983), Roemer and Champanis (1982), Spyridakis (2000).

For your review only.

Excerpt from *Hot Text: Web Writing that Works*. (New Riders).