

The First Question.

I am sure that within the mythologies of the world there have been many attempts to pin down the first question posed. I don't know if it figures amongst them, but "Does he (or do you) understand?" should be a candidate. Making sense, and making the right sense, is of primary importance.

It sounds obvious, but if you want to make sense you have to know what you want to say. That can be in general terms, or in the minutia of the significant moment, but the sense and meaning you are trying to get across is most important. Very often the very act of defining what was previously a vague idea will show you things about the order you want to present the information in, but there is nothing like sitting down and writing it. Your first draught needn't be detailed, but it gives you something to work from. For those who want to write there is no substitute for writing. When you have a first draught look at these things to help you decide if what you have written gets your meaning across as you intended :-

The meaning conveyed by the relationships of parts within the sentences.

The relationships between sentences.

The relationships between paragraphs; normally sentences and paragraphs should be in uninterrupted sequence.

Does what you are presenting develop something, a setting, a plot, an argument, a character, an emotion ... and is the development clear.

Within the sentence are the things that are related placed next to each other?

You will find other things to look for which are relevant to you, but these are good general points concerning sense to start you off. I will expand slightly on the last one, which resembles the first one.

"See this stake I'm holding? Hit it, when I nod my head"

Does not carry the same meaning as,

"See this stake I'm holding? When I nod my head, hit it."

The first refers to the Dracula movie, the second to the comedy with two workmen; if 'Hit it' is related to the stake it should be placed next to it.

It is usually more subtle than that, but the effect can still be confusing, or simply distracting.

Look at this extract from Christopher Hassall's biography of Rupert Brooke:-

"The vicarage was ... of red brick ... ; at the back was a veranda, sagging in places, and canopied all along with Virginia creeper, and a profuse, wet smelling, overgrown garden with random trees ...

Brooke rented three rooms ... his bedroom had been a nursery ... ; beneath it was the living room, a round table in the centre littered with books and letters, and a glass door with yellow panes of art nouveau design which, he said, gave him the illusion of sunshine on a wet day," ... I have broken off before the part that shows the veranda was not canopied with a garden, or

the table littered by a glass door, as might first appear, but the part that make this clear comes at the end, after one might have made the false assumption. True the assumptions are unlikely ones, but even if the reader does not believe in them they provide a potential distraction.

The first, 'relationships of parts within the sentence' is not quite the same, consider the statement,

'A green rope hung from the centre of the room'

It contains parts that are green, rope, hanging, and a room, the arrangement of the parts can be used to effect: without harming the meaning.

"A green rope hung from the centre of the room."

"A rope hung from the centre of the room; it was green."

It is likely that the reader of the second sentence will have initially assumed the rope is a normal, brown, rope colour, if there were merely a comma after 'room' he might even assume it was a green room. The sudden change in expectation sends alarm bells ringing, 'green must be significant'. It is a good trick provided green is significant. On the other hand if there is no great significance, hold your reader's attention, use the first form. An avid reader becomes enthralled by a book, a state a bit like trance, don't break the spell.

Something similar happens in, 'canopied all along with Virginia creeper, and a profuse, wet smelling, overgrown garden.' 'Profuse' and 'wet smelling' could well describe something that 'canopied' in a similar way to the creeper. It is only when you get to the last word that you are suddenly pushed out into the garden.

Losing your readers is always a danger. My 'green rope' example was a simple sentence with simple parts, but sometimes the parts can be clauses and sub-clauses. That was more a style of the seventeenth century that hangs on in legal documents, but it still turns up. I would not recommend it generally for fiction, long and complicated sentences are hard to structure and interpret, and readers can get lost even without doors in the middle of tables. Those two extracts come from a sentence of over a hundred and forty words and a following one of over a hundred, both containing multiple semicolons. My longer sentences tend to be around twenty five words.

The manner of presenting something can subtly direct the reader, for example when I said "I will expand slightly on the last one, which resembles the first one." I was hoping people would check back; maybe because they had not taken it in fully, maybe because it seems strange that the last and first should be similar in meaning. People may not check of course, it can be worth giving a straightforward injunction, 'Re-read the list and consider it carefully', or even re-writing the list. Tautology can be belt and braces, doubly sure.

What you want to get across and how to do it merits a lot of consideration, it is a luxury you can afford as a writer. Though too much procrastination can be the enemy of writing, the overall structure can be presented in many ways and very few writers have a deadline to compel a hasty choice.

Complacency bred by familiarity is a danger, for example your character being fully formed in your mind, but not fully laid out for the reader. For your reader to understand you must explain, they cannot mind read.

Start at a good place and build on that in a logical manner, the place may or may not be the beginning, and the logic is not necessarily bound by the world of reality, but a clear starting place and structure will help your reader follow you. If you are doing something out of the ordinary, such as not starting at the beginning, you should have reason for this. If that reason is purely to 'Make me different from all other writers; make me popular and wonderfully run after by five this afternoon' it probably will not work, any more than it did for Old Man Kangaroo in Kipling's 'Just so' story.

Emphasising things can be done various ways. One of these is my 'green rope' example above, another is to go into detailed description; so a detailed description of an insignificant scene or person can be misleading. It might be a fine piece of prose taken in isolation, but it needs to perform a function within the text. The true measure of your writing is how much of what you set out to convey is conveyed to your reader, not how you feel about it. Try to see your writing from the reader's point of view. The structure of a piece of writing may affect things, such as the tone and rhythm, but it should be primarily organised with an eye and ear to the sense. Consider what you have written carefully in terms of the 'rules', it may be you have rejected the rules, and have a reason to write as you do, but be sure of it; will your sense and reason still be accessible to others? Starting sentences with "And" or "But" and using adverbs ending in "-ly" is not regarded as any great sin nowadays, but why give your readers even a mild hiccup if you don't need to? And, if you normally refrain, when you deliberately structure a sentence to start with 'and', it stands out, (If you see what I mean).

It is well known that none of the so called 'rules' of writing are universal; that is the first universal rule of writing, the second is "Consider carefully and contemplate long before declaring "Final draft'." Inspiration may provide the flash of insight needed, or the combination of words or phrases that 'say' it to you perfectly, but careful thought will tell you if that is what you want your insight to shed light on, and whether those words will 'say it' to others in the same way they do to you. The products of inspiration are often rare jewels, like uncut diamonds they can be improved with consideration, or a careless cut can shatter them.

Two real life examples, one from literature, one from music.

'Trout mask replica' was a carefully scored and rehearsed album. Captain Beefheart had tried letting musicians improvise; it sounded contrived. To get something that did not took considerable contrivance.

'Doctor Sax' was written straight off, no editing, Jack Kerouac's thoughts flowed freely as they came in to his head and were put straight on to paper; the way 'On the Road' was supposed to have been, but wasn't. Dr Sax reads like it was written that way, in my opinion it is terrible.

Mind you I also thought 'Dharma Bums' was his best by far, and 'On the Road' only so so,

opinions will always vary, and we are all entitled to hold our own, but the opinion based on fact and consideration will usually carry more weight in the long run.