# REFINING THE GIVEN-NEW EXPECTATION FOR CLASSROOM USE: A LESSON IN THE IMPORTANCE OF AUDIENCE

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It is wonderfully intuitive: Given information should come before new information. Known by various names, such as "old-new," "known-new," "and "familiar-new," this principle characterizes the normal, default order of information in both spoken and written texts. The power of this structural expectation lies in its implicit familiarity from speaking and its simplicity: the concept is easily grasped, and easily applied to texts that have clear distinctions between given and new information. Moreover, the payoff is high (Clark and Haviland; Kolln). By introducing this one principle during the revision process[1], writing instructors can successfully address a central cause of awkward sentences and unintentionally confusing text, and writers can successfully revise their work for cohesion and flow. For this good reason, the given-new principle appears in many (if not all) rhetorical and functional grammar texts as a critical means to enhance paragraph cohesion and flow (Hancock; Kolln; Noguchi; Rossen-Knill and Bakhmetyeva; Vande Kopple; Williams).

Despite its success, when applied to real student writing, the current general definitions of the given-new expectation raise some troublesome questions that, if left unanswered, limit its usefulness: *When given information slips out of the reader's consciousness, is it given or new? Must given appear in every sentence? If information is expected, is it always given? How explicit or implicit should the given information be? If words are repeated, are they always given, or might they be part of new information?* This paper aims to address

these questions, ideally as simply as possible, in order to establish a more robust and writer-friendly explanation of the given-new expectation, one that foregrounds audience awareness as a prerequisite of effective writing. This writer-oriented definition synthesizes and adds to definitions of the given-new principle put forward by linguists (Clark and Haviland; Halliday; Prince; Chafe; Dahl) and language-oriented writing scholars (Hancock; Kolln; Noguchi; Rossen-Knill and Bakhmetyeva; Vande Kopple; Williams). This work also operationalizes the refined definition through sets of easily answered questions that help writers apply the principle to their own writing.

## The Backdrop

"Dug. Dug," says the lady in the pharmacy.

"Dug," I join in. "Oo y'rrah?"

"Aid u too y'rrah?"

"Mh-mm," she'll say, as she unwraps my hair lotion. (Amis 7)

Confusing? Yes. And a perfect example of the effect of introducing new information without grounding it in the familiar. Ineffective? Not at all, because the disorienting new information effectively communicates an important message. The reader, after some time and effort (more than some might be willing to put in), will likely come to this understanding: the dialogue is between a saleswoman at a pharmacy and the narrator, who a moment earlier lay near death in surgery and now seems to be retracing his life. Through sounding out the letters in the dialogue, first forwards, then backwards, word by word, and then from the end, one stumbles into a coherent discovery: *everything* in this world is backwards; the narrator's moment of death in surgery begins a backward-playing documentary of his life. Eventually, this new

information becomes routine. Against this now familiar backdrop, what had previously been familiar becomes new. The reader is told,

> The world is going to start making
> sense . . .
> . . . *Now.* (115)

With time still moving backwards, the doctor-narrator oversees the process of returning hair, teeth, clothing–of putting people back together. From somewhere inside this thought puzzle, the meaning-sense explodes: this is the surrealistic, incomprehensible cruelty of Nazi Germany, where doctors take people apart. In Amis's creation of message, confusion trumps clarity.[2]

I begin with this example to foreground two critical points–the backdrop for this paper. First, the given-new expectation is not a rule to be followed blindly. It is a reader expectation, one that may be flouted to good effect. Whether or not flouting does lead to good effect depends on the degree of disruption and the extent to which the reader is willing to work through the difficulties; this in turn depends on audience, purpose, and genre, as well as on the worth of the message.[3] Secondly, this paper's discussion of the given-new expectation should not lead one to believe that this pattern alone accounts for a clear text, or that a clear text will effectively relay the writer's message (as many a bored reader knows). While clarity, cohesion, and flow are important to effective writing, their importance varies, again, with audience, purpose, and genre. The focus here is on helping those writers who are confusing their readers, or otherwise making them stumble, *without meaning to.* For these writers, knowledge of the given-new expectation can help them gain control over their revision choices and the effects of these choices on their readers.

## Background and Definitions

The given-new expectation was first described by linguists as a natural discourse pattern in which given or familiar information preceded new information (Clark and Haviland; Halliday; Prince; Chafe; Dahl). Later, scholars bridging the worlds of linguistics and composition brought this knowledge to instructional writing texts (Hancock; Kolln; Noguchi; Rossen-Knill and Bakhmetyeva; Vande Kopple; Williams). In the context of writing, the given-new principle, often referred to in instructional writing contexts as the given-new expectation, may be generally understood as follows: readers *expect* given information before new information. "Given" refers to information or ideas that have already been established for the reader. "New" refers to information or ideas that are new to the reader. The majority of current writing texts offer some version of this general definition (Hancock; Kolln; Rossen-Knill and Bakhmetyeva; Williams). Williams, for example, explains given-new as a means to increase flow by connecting the end of one sentence to the beginning of the previous sentence. He explains, "Sentences are cohesive when the last few words of one set up the information that appears in the first few words of the next one. That's what gives us our experience of 'flow'" (76). He thus instructs, "Begin sentences with information familiar to your reader," and "End sentences with information that readers cannot anticipate" (78). In describing given (or "familiar") information, Williams recognizes that it may emerge from the text or from the reader's knowledge of the subject matter or situation (77). While Kolln also presents the "known-new contract" as a means to improve paragraph cohesion, she explicitly situates the pattern in the writer-reader relationship. Focusing first on the position of information in the sentence, she explains, "the known, or old or given, information coming first, generally filling the subject slot, and the new information–the reason for the sentence–in the predicate, where the main emphasis of the sentence naturally occurs" (68). Shifting to a rhetorical perspective, she further explains, "It relates to both what the reader knows and what the reader expects" (68). Also viewing grammar as both meaningful

and functional, Hancock offers a rich description of given-new, concluding, "Coherence is built through an interweaving of the given and the new, a continuation of meaning and an expansion of meaning almost simultaneously" (58). For Hancock, as the given-new pattern moves the text forward, much like growing waves, the text's meaning emerges. Most recently, Elbow has joined the discussion of given-new to emphasize its origin in speaking and to move writers to feel this natural speaking-sense in their writing: "But we can get the *feel* of this reader-friendly, given new pattern that comes for free in our speaking. We will find it in our speaking on the page and also if we read aloud to revise . . . "[4] (Elbow, *Vernacular Eloquence* 96). Elbow argues that writers have a spoken-level instinct of given-new that contributes to the coherence he feels in their freewriting, but fails to find as often in final drafts.

Each of these explanations of given-new, although framed slightly differently, has at its core the same general principle that readers expect given information before new information, as well as the understanding that structuring text according to this principle improves a reader's ability to follow a writer's meaning across a paragraph. The general description works quite well for straightforward examples–those in which the given is easily distinguished from the new, as in example 1 below. (Given information is underlined; **new information is bolded**.) For the sake of analysis, imagine that the previous paragraph has been about Sarah, but that the John, the reader, is unfamiliar with the store and the event surrounding Sarah's trip to the store.

(1) (S1) Sarah **went to the store to buy peaches and a yellow apple.** (S2) The store **carried a large variety of things, including water bottles, hardware, and camping equipment.**

Sentence 1 begins with "Sarah," which is given information because it has been established in the previous paragraph. The sentence ends with "went to the store to buy peaches and a yellow

apple," which is new because John becomes aware of this event only through reading about it here. Sentence 2 begins with "The store," which is given because it refers to the store that was established in the first sentence. The sentence ends with "carried a large variety of things, including water bottles, hardware, and camping equipment," which is new information for John.

When dealing with simple, manufactured examples, sorting out given and new does not seem to cause difficulty. Moreover, beginning with this type of straightforward example seems a very reasonable way to illustrate a new concept to students. Not surprisingly, however, as one shifts away from instructional examples to the messy reality of naturally produced drafts, distinguishing given from new can be quite problematic. To demonstrate these problems efficiently, I have manufactured example 2, reserving the use of student texts to discuss each problem more fully. For the excerpt below, assume that Sarah is the audience and is not familiar with John, the store, or any other information in the paragraph. (Given is underlined; new is bolded. ?? refers to areas that might raise questions for the writer who is trying to apply the given-new expectation.)

> (2) **??John stopped at the stand on 5th Avenue**. ??**The apples were perfect**. He **decided to buy some ??large, yellow** apples and **some ??small green** ones. He imagined that he would use the yellow apples for apple sauce, as they had a light, sweet taste that would make it unnecessary to add any sugar. The green ones might be best for eating with cheese, as they had a tangy flavor that went perfectly with a good cheddar cheese. ??The stand would be open at least for another month, so he could count on good apples for a while.

As noted by the question marks, even this short sequence presents the writer with many puzzles that the general definitions do not address. Based on the general expectation that given precedes new in a sentence, a writer might expect that both the

first and the second sentences ought to begin with given and thus be stumped about how to address the lack of any explicit given. Perhaps more problematic is the status of "apples." On the one hand, they are not mentioned in the previous sentence. On the other hand, while it may take some small amount of inferencing to work out that the apples come from the stand on 5th Avenue, overall, the first two-sentences seem to flow reasonably well: they are understandable and the apparent lack of given doesn't seem to interrupt the reading process. Thus, the writer trying to follow the given-new expectation might feel conflicted: she might feel obliged to put in some given information, leading to something like, *John stopped at the stand on 5th Avenue. He found the stand's apples to be perfect.* At the same time, she might sense that the text becomes heavy with the added given information and prefer the more concise version of example 2 with its full focus on the perfect apples. This line of reasoning naturally leads to the question, *How explicit must the given be?* The third sentence raises a very different kind of problem. As the alternating underlines and bolded text illustrate, the given information seems woven in throughout the new information. If the given is expected to be before the new, does this mean that the writer must somehow pull out the given and restructure the sentence so that all references to apples appear at the beginning of the sentence? Of course, the writer sees no way to do this without completely disrupting the sentence's form and meaning. Moving on to consider the last sentence, the writer decides that "The stand" is given, as it is mentioned in the very first sentence of the paragraph, but wonders if it feels unexpected–as if it were new, so she feels confused about why it can be in the given position but not clearly feel like given information. The unfortunate outcome of these kinds of questions is a growing skepticism about the idea that a sentence is expected to proceed from given to new.

Two relatively old writing texts, Vande Kopple's *Clear and Coherent Prose* (now out of print) and Noguchi's *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits and Possibilities*, offer substantially more than current texts and begin to address these problems. Drawing

from these texts and work in linguistics (Clark and Haviland; Halliday; Prince; Chafe; Dahl), the following sections investigate these problems in order to refine the definition of the given-new principle expectation and increase its usefulness for writing instructors and writers.

### Problem 1: Out of Sight, Out of Mind: When Given Information Slips out of the Reader's Consciousness, Is It Given or New?

Consider this common writing problem: on page one, a writer notes an idea, source, or perhaps a theory that is completely new to the reader, such as utilitarianism. This idea is not discussed or mentioned again for the next eight pages. On page nine, a sentence begins, "Utilitarianism accounts for the character's decision to . . . ." By beginning the sentence with "utilitarianism," the writer suggests that this concept is given, expected by the reader, but the reader, who has not encountered this concept for eight pages, feels surprised, disoriented: the reader may recognize that the writer expects her to be familiar with the term, but to her it feels new.

Based on the general definition of givenness in many writing texts, *utilitarianism* would be given information because it has been mentioned earlier in the paper. However, the reader, who hasn't thought about it in eight pages, will receive it as if it were new because it feels unexpected. To resolve this apparent contradiction, one must understand that the given-new principle is not about words on paper, but rather about ideas in writers' and readers' minds (Chafe): "[G]rammar does not directly interact with the TEXT. Rather, the grammar interacts with the MIND that produces or interprets the text" (Givón, "The Grammar of Referential Coherence" 5). This is immediately intuitive when one becomes conscious of the fact that a person may have one idea in mind and several ways of representing it in words. As Chafe explains,

> Among the things we have in mind when we talk are the ideas of various particular individuals and events. We choose certain words to express these ideas. For example, we may have in mind a particular person, and we may express our idea of this person on one occasion as *Bob*, on another as *the guy I bought the boat from*, on another as *he*, or whatever. (28)

As Chafe's example illustrates, when trying to determine whether information in a text is given or new, one cannot only look for the repetition of words or the explicit use of words to refer to a previous idea. Rather, one must consider whether the text leads the reader to receive the information as given or new.

Directly addressing this issue, Noguchi tells writers that information that has left the writer's consciousness "must be reestablished, or 'reactivated,' as given information" (93). Perhaps it might be reactivated through a moment of metadiscourse, something along the lines of, "As noted earlier in this paper, utilitarianism . . . ." In this case, the information might be characterized as given. On the other hand, if not reactivated, perhaps "utilitarianism" might be said to have lost its given status and become new information. Chafe clarifies this situation by locating consciousness at the center of the given-new principle:

> Given (or old) information is that knowledge which the speaker assumes to be in the consciousness of the addressee at the time of the utterance. So-called new information is what the speaker assumes he is introducing into the addressee's consciousness by what he says.[5] (30)

Chafe demonstrates the distinction with an example in which someone says, "*I saw your father yesterday*" (30). In this case, as Chafe points out, the hearer is certainly familiar with his or her father, but the hearer is not *thinking* of the father at this moment, which is why the speaker mentions him. The fact that a writer and reader share knowledge is not sufficient for identifying given

information; for it to be given, the shared knowledge must be conscious in the reader's mind. From the perspective of a writer intending to communicate clearly, the new information is that which is not predicted and not expected–*not* active in the reader's mind. This means that information that is not active in the reader's mind–even if it is previously mentioned or known by the writer and reader–is new information.

Applying Chafe's definition of new information to the opening problem involving utilitarianism, the writer must assess whether or not information is active in a reader's mind. The writer who determines that it has fallen out of the reader's active consciousness has a number of options, such as structuring the text in a way that meets the reader's given-new expectation or re-establishing it as given by means of metadiscourse (e.g., as noted earlier).

**Problem 2: Must Given Appear in Every Sentence?**

The question of whether or not given information must appear in each sentence arises in two different circumstances: in the first sentence of a text, and in the subsequent sentences. The first of these situations has been addressed by Noguchi: the beginning of a new text may present all new information (92). Explaining why this is so, Halliday says, "[D]iscourse has to start somewhere, so there can be discourse-initiating units consisting of a New element only" (89). Returning to the first sentence of example 2, *John stopped at the stand on 5th Avenue*, a writer might now decide that it may be rightly identified as all new information because it is the starting point for the discourse. It is possible, however, for "discourse . . . to start somewhere" other than a first sentence, as in the following excerpt.

> (3) Pet Ownership and Desire for Death Among Older Adults
> Older adults are the fastest growing segment of the United States population (Kinsella, Wan, & U.S. Census Bureau, 2008), and older adults die by suicide at a higher rate than any other age group (Nock et al., 2008). (Stanley)

In this example, the title establishes the idea of "older adults," which then becomes the given for the first sentence of the paper. Information that is based outside the text and shared by the writer and reader may also lead to given appearing in the first sentence. One might easily imagine, for example, a teacher assigning a paper on Hawthorne and then receiving a paper in which the first sentence begins, "Hawthorne . . . ." In this case, "Hawthorne" would be given by virtue of the idea being previously established by the situation. Quite often, however, the first sentence of a text may be the starting point for the discourse and rightly indentified as having only new information.

The uncertainty around whether or not given information must appear in second, third (and so on) sentences is a more difficult problem. This was made clear to me by a colleague, Katherine Schaefer, who shared a classroom experience that caused her and her students some difficulty. In keeping with many of the general definitions, she explained, as Williams instructs, that revising text so that it meets the given-new expectation will improve cohesion, that readers expect given to precede new, and that the given information in one sentence should refer back to information in the preceding sentence. The implication (and the teacher's understanding) involved two problematic ideas: 1) the given should be present–something one could point to or underline–in each sentence, and 2) the given in a sentence must refer back to information in the previous sentence. At first, Katherine and her students found the given-new expectation quite helpful and could without difficulty track the given-new pattern in sample paragraphs, as well as in their own writing. Then the discussion shifted to a published paragraph that had several sentences without given information:

> (4) (S1)People with AIDS (PWAs) and the social groups to which they belong have been stigmatized worldwide since the epidemic began. (S2)Stigma has interfered with the effective societal response to AIDS and has imposed hardships on people living with HIV as well as their loved

> ones, caregivers, and communities. (S3)PWAs have been shunned by strangers and family members discriminated against in employment and health care, driven from their homes, and subjected to physical abuse. (S4)Fear of stigma has deterred individuals from being tested for HIV and from disclosing their seropositive status to sexual partners, family, and friends. (Herek, Capitanio, and Widman 371).

The difficulty came with the movement of information across sentences 3 and 4. Sentence 4 did not obviously include given information from sentence 3. It did include the idea of a stigma, but this referred back to sentence 2, not to the immediately preceding sentence, which focused on how people suffered as a result of stigma. Because the paragraph did not explicitly meet the given-new expectation from one sentence to the next, but still read perfectly well, the validity of the given-new expectation was challenged.

In fact, the paragraph does follow the given-new pattern even though each sentence does not explicitly include information from the previous sentence or other given information. Once again, to see this, one must recall that the given-new principle is not about words on paper, but rather about ideas in writers' and readers' minds (Chafe).

Although Vande Kopple and Noguchi do not explicitly say that the given is about ideas rather than words, they do imply this by recognizing that given information need not be explicit in the text; rather, it may be inferred by the reader. Vande Kopple defines given information as

> that which readers know about from the rhetorical situation, which readers with even a minimal degree of knowledge about the world would know, which is mentioned prior to that sentence, or which is recoverable or inferable from material prior to that sentence. (163)

The final piece of this definition, information that is "recoverable or inferable," is of particular importance to the common problem described in example 4. Vande Kopple describes and illustrates various kinds of inferences in which the given is elided and quite acceptable, such as in this case:

> The stars were clearly reflected in Croton Pond.
> The moon shone brightly and cast the birch trees into stark relief. (168)

As Vande Kopple explains, the reader can easily work out that if stars are present, as the first sentence indicates, then the moon is also present. Hence, our world knowledge combined with the information in the first sentence establishes the presence of a given *idea* (a clear night) that need not be repeated. As Halliday explains,

> [B]y its nature the Given is likely to be **phoric**–referring to something already present in the verbal or non-verbal context; and one way of achieving phoricity is through ellipsis, a grammatical form in which certain features are not realized in the structure (see Chapter 9). Structurally, therefore, we shall say that an information unit consists of an obligatory New element plus an optional Given. (89)

Noguchi conceptualizes this simply from the point of view of the reader, "Given information is information that can be recovered from the context, either linguistic or extralinguistic" (92). This recovery may or may not involve an explicit given in a sentence.

Strengthened by the understanding that given-new is about ideas, not words (Chafe), Noguchi's and Vande Kopple's extended definitions of given information account for the lack of an explicit given in examples 2 and 4. To see how this works, reconsider the first two sentences of example 2: *John stopped at the stand on 5th Avenue. ??The apples were perfect.* If the writer and reader share the knowledge that the stand is a fruit stand, not just an

apple stand, then the full clause *The apples were perfect* would be understood as new, with the given information–the fruit stand–being absent because it is recoverable. The reader can work out that the stand mentioned in the first sentence is the fruit stand based on writer's and reader's shared knowledge. In addition, "apples," because they are a form of fruit, confirm this idea and help the reader to infer that the given information is the fruit stand. Thus, the presence of the given information is understood because the idea is in the reader's mind; it need not be explicit if the reader can recover it easily.

The concerns expressed about example 4 may be similarly addressed. The second sentence establishes the *idea* that stigma around AIDS is harmful in a number of ways. This idea is the elided given information in the third sentence, which presents the new information that there are several ways in which the stigma is harmful. Sentence four, which does repeat the word stigma (more on this later), presents and comments on a new concept, fear of stigma. Again, this sentence depends on the previously established idea that stigma around AIDS is harmful (S2), information which the writer need not repeat because it is easily recovered. In sum, both sentences 3 and 4 present new information based on elided given information that was established in sentence 2. Based on the class's assessment that the paragraph reads well, it is reasonable to infer that the elided given information can be recovered easily, such that it need not be present in the immediately preceding sentence. Thus, contrary to what the general definition has led the class to believe, the paragraph does meet the given-new expectation.

### Problem 3. Depending too Much on Expectedness to Identify Given Information

Using expectedness to help distinguish given from new information has great intuitive appeal. It would be a mistake, however, to use this characteristic alone to identify given information because new information may also be expected in a general way. This is because readers expect paragraphs to unfold

in patterned ways (for explanation and examples, see Vande Kopple's chapters on topic and comment or Halliday's work on theme and rheme (Vande Kopple, Halliday)). In addition, because each sentence is in a dialogue with the adjacent sentences, much as utterances in conversation, each sentence sets up general expectations for what will come next (for explanation of how this conversational expectation works in writing, see Rossen-Knill and Bakhmetyeva). If a paragraph begins, "There are three widely accepted arguments for reducing the use of fossil fuels," then the reader will expect to next hear about each of these reasons. However, the reader would not be able to predict the content of each reason. Herein lies the difference between expected information and predicted information.

*Expecting* a discussion of a particular topic, or *expecting* the topic to unfold in a particular way–such as by presenting reasons or examples–is not the same as *predicting* the actual idea. Consider this example from Chafe:

> Bill went to the store to buy some peaches, but ___ was not able to find any.
> Bill went to the store to buy some peaches, but ___ discovered that they were rotten.
> vs.
> Bill went to the store to buy some peaches, but he _____.

What readers should feel from these examples is that one can predict that some reference to Bill will fill the slots in (a) and (b), such as a repetition of "Bill" or the pronoun "he." In (c), however, although one might expect some general discussion of what happened when Bill went to the store, the reader could not exactly predict the outcome. This distinction between expected and predicted can help students deal with the confusion they may feel about information that is at once generally expected and new.

***How to Determine if Information is Given or New***

Based on the previous discussion, given information refers to the writer's assessment of how conscious an idea is in the reader's mind. Within this framework, information is given if it is

- stated previously in the text or suggested by previous text or the situation,
- easily worked out, or recoverable (by virtue of being active in the reader's consciousness),
- and expected.

The definition of given information may be restructured as a series of questions that serve as a step-by-step guide for the writer to estimate whether information is likely to be given or new to the reader. To demonstrate how this test might work, consider the following two sentences, and in particular, the given-new status of "in Ancient Greece."

> (5) The sports world has always been controlled and influenced by men. In Ancient Greece, men were the only participants of the athletics because the games were focused on strength, speed, and power. (beginning of a paragraph from a paper on the relationship between gender stereotypes and homosexuals' participation in sports)

Using the test for distinguishing given from new information, the writer might proceed as follows:

Step 1. Is the information **stated** in the previous text and easy to work out? Yes? The information is **given**. No? Go on to question 2.

The writer, Martin, knows that "in Ancient Greece" is not in the previous text, so he moves on to question 2.

Step 2. Is the information **suggested** by the previous text or the situation, easy for the reader to work out, and expected? Yes? The information is **given**. No? Then the information is new.

To answer these questions, Martin must identify and analyze his audience. He decides that his reader is a young guy, definitely

an avid sports fan who loves reading *Sports Illustrated*, but not someone who thinks much about the history or social implications of sports. With audience in mind, Martin considers what in the previous text might lead his audience to interpret "in ancient Greece" as given information. He wonders if "has always been controlled" might suggest something about the history of men's influence on sports, which might in turn lead a historically-minded reader to think about examples like the sports of Ancient Greece. He suspects that his non-historically-minded sports-fan audience will have a basic familiarity with Ancient Greece; he doubts that he will bring Ancient Greece to mind in response to a comment about sports being controlled by men. He decides that his reader will not expect "in Ancient Greece" and will not easily work out that it is given information. He concludes that, for his intended audience, "in Ancient Greece" will be new information.

Notice, however, the effect of changing the audience: the same writer analyzing the same text might reasonably conclude the opposite, that is, that "in Ancient Greece" is given information. Imagine the audience is a peer in the writer's class on sports and gender, someone who has been part of ongoing class discussions about the connection between the role of men in athletics both in Ancient Greece and today. In this case, the writer might appropriately determine that simply mentioning the idea of men in sports will immediately activate the idea of Ancient Greece in his reader's mind. The writer can reasonably believe that the reader will easily work out that "in Ancient Greece" references a critical idea from the previous sentence in that it is an example of a "sports world has always been controlled and influenced by men." In this case, "in Ancient Greece" would be suggested by the first sentence, easily worked out, and expected. It would be given information.

To communicate the intended message, the writer must ultimately determine which information is to be presented as given and which as new. At the same time, it is the reader who ultimately determines whether or not the writer's message is received as intended. A mantra, then, for the given-new

expectation might be, "The reader is always right; yet the writer is always right" (Elbow *Sharing and Responding* 4). The reader works out a meaning through his or her unique interaction with the writer's text; this interpretation is "right" by virtue of being true to the reader's experience. The writer, who creates the text according to his or her unique message, rightly knows the message he or she wants to convey through the text. The reader's right interpretation and the writer's true intended message may, however, differ significantly. Hence every writer's interesting communication problem: how to maximize the possibility that the writer's "right" message and the reader's "right" interpretation are in accord. Relating this apparent paradox to the given-new expectation highlights the essential role that the reader plays for the writer during the writing and revision process. While it is the writer who determines which information she wants the reader to accept as given and which as new, once the writer has crafted her message, the reader determines how the information is in fact received. Thus, without a reader, the writer can never be "right." This is perhaps the best reason for a writer to test out her text on an audience.

### Problem 4: How Explicit or Implicit should the Given Information be? Distinguishing between Functional and Dysfunctional Repetition

Knowing abstractly that the given may be more or less present in a sentence is important to making effective writing choices, as is the idea that repetition may be quite useful to cohesion in some cases while excessive in others (Vande Kopple, Hancock). In practice, however, the student–often warned against "rep" and advised, "be specific"–might well feel confused about how to apply these principles to his or her own writing, particularly when a misguided decision might yield yet another "awk." Vande Kopple addresses this problem in "Avoiding Unnecessary Repetition of Given Information," where he instructs students to beware of repeating unnecessary given information or using too many words to convey necessary information. He also offers reasons why

writers might rightly decide to repeat information, such as for emphasis or to help the reader move smoothly from one idea to another (207-225). To support these claims, Vande Kopple provides examples that demonstrate both positive and negative effects of common types of repetition. Two examples, in particular, highlight why it can be so difficult for a student writer to know whether the use of repetition is excessive or helpful. In one example, a student includes too much given information, thus unnecessarily slowing down the reading process. Considering a different, imagined scenario, such as giving directions, Vande Kopple observes that he might in fact welcome a relatively high amount of repeated given information.

Woven throughout Vande Kopple's analysis of effective and ineffective examples of repetition is the idea of audience. Similarly, for linguists, the audience serves as the focal point for understanding the given-new principle. For Halliday, language and discourse structure are inseparable from their social function: "The term 'text' refers to any instance of language, in any medium, that makes sense to someone who knows the language" (3). Clark's definition of the given-new principle also depends on the relationship between the speaker/writer and the hearer/reader: Given refers to "information he [the speaker] believes the listener already knows and accepts as true," and new refers to "information he [the speaker] believes the listener does not yet know" (3). For one more particularly pointed comment, consider how Prince frames her discussion of given-new: "[T]he crucial factor appears to be the tailoring of an utterance by a sender to meet the particular assumed needs of the intended receiver." Thus, to determine how explicit or implicit the given information should be, the writer must work out how much repetition the reader needs.

In fact, in discussing the role of repetition in text coherence, Givón explicitly shifts attention from recurrence in the text itself to how patterns of recurrence are used by the reader to make meaning. As noted earlier, "[I]n actual communicative behavior, the grammar does not directly interact with the TEXT. Rather,

the grammar interacts with the MIND that produces or interprets the text" (Givón, "The Grammar of Referential Coherence" 5). The text becomes the writer's "set of *mental processing instructions*" (6) for the reader, and meaning emerges as the reader interacts with the writer's text. Within this view, the question about how much to repeat may be recast as a question about how much repetition is needed to either reactivate or maintain an idea in the reader's mind. How one phrases the question matters a great deal. The writer might be tempted to ask, *Should I or shouldn't I repeat this information?* In this case, the writer is likely to be fooled into thinking that there are only two choices: to repeat or not to repeat. The question ought to be, *To what extent should I repeat information?* The writer has many choices, each of which varies according to how strong a signal the reader needs to recall a previous idea. Beginning with a situation in which the idea is not active in the reader's mind, the reader may opt for

1. full repetition of a previous phrase or clause (e.g., "the presidential debate" is first presented and then presented again),
2. partial/modified repetition of the phrase or clause (e.g., "the presidential debate" is followed by "the debate"),
3. representation of the idea without any word repetition (e.g., "The presidential debate" is followed by "it"),
4. and, when the given is clearly active in the reader's mind, zero repetition. (Givón, "The Grammar of Referential Coherence" 21)

In order to decide what degree of repetition is needed, one might draw on Givón's "code-quantity principle": as the referent becomes less accessible or predictable to the reader, more words are needed to bring the idea to the reader's consciousness (Givón, "The Pragmatics of Word-Order" 249). Several factors figure into how accessible the referent is likely to be, including the distance between one mention of an idea and the next mention of that idea (as discussed in "Problem 1: Out of Sight, Out of Mind"); how

important the idea is to the writer's message; the extent to which the idea is familiar and accessible to the reader by virtue of shared writer-reader contexts; and whether there are competing ideas that might distract the reader from a current idea, or interfere with activating the idea that immediately concerns the writer[6] ("The Grammar of the Referential Coherence"14). To determine how much repetition a text needs, the writer must look beyond the text to evaluate how much the reader needs.

As the previous discussion of audience suggests, while the given-new pattern helps student-writers improve text cohesion and coherence, it simultaneously helps them experience the necessity of audience when making choices about sentence structure. Without an explicit audience, one cannot even determine whether or not information, such as *the apples* in example 2, is given or new. The same idea may be given for one reader and new for another. Whereas *the apples* is given for a reader who is familiar with the fruit stand on 5th avenue, if the audience were a tourist–someone who only associates a "stand" with a place that sells newspapers, it would be understood as new information. For this tourist-audience, the writer would need to explicitly establish the given information, perhaps by specifying "fruit stand" in the first or second sentence before introducing *The apples were perfect.* Bringing this kind of example into the classroom demonstrates for students not only why writers need readers to test the effectiveness of their writing on readers, but also why writers must have intended readers in mind to make informed decisions about how to present and structure information in their texts.

Ultimately, the writer needs the reader to determine whether or not the given information needs to be repeated. The following test offers a way for the writer to bring this issue to the reader and receive feedback to guide revision.

### *How to Determine whether or not Given Information Should be Explicit*

Because it involves the audience, this test offers students a concrete way to address what otherwise seems to be a very sticky, very abstract decision-making process. To see how this works, consider whether the given information in sentence 2 ought to be assumed or explicit:[7]

> (6) (S1) [C]hange is ubiquitous, necessary, and the foundation for this country. (S2) The common ground that new and old citizens tread on opposes uniformity. (S3) That's not to say that cultural centers such as Minnesota and the Midwest remain as they were in Scandinavia, but that Lady Liberty does not rid those immigrants of their personal identity. (S4) China-town is no Beijing, just as Little Havana is no actual Havana. (from a paper analyzing the concept of Americanization)

For the sake of illustration, imagine that a writer, Ming, analyzes (S4) using the test:

Step 1. Anticipate your reader's response: Can the reader easily work out how the new information relates to previous information? If yes, move on to step 2. If no, try adding in the missing given information or a transition.

Ming's audience is his classmates. He thinks that his classmates will be familiar with China-town and Little Havana as cultural centers, so that the new information, "China-town . . ., " will be expected because it is an example of the "cultural center" that has been established in the previous text. He moves on to Step 2.

Step 2. Try out the writing on the real audience or a close approximation of the real audience. Can the reader easily work out how the new information relates to previous information? To figure this out, use the relevance test (adapted from Rossen-Knill and Bakhmetyeva):

a. Read the sentence before the sentence in question (in this case, (S3)) to a test-audience and ask your listener what questions come to mind or what he or she expects will come next.
b. Now read the sentence in question, (S4). Does it answer any of the reader's questions or match the reader's expectations? Yes? You do not need to add given information. No? Talk with the reader to find out why the new information is unexpected. Consider adding given information and/or metadiscourse to re-activate previously established information that has fallen out of the reader's consciousness.

As Ming considers his audience, he realizes that his classmates are not all the same and may have different responses. He decides to ask two classmates, Manny and Patricia, to be his test-audience. Following the second step, he reads the first sentence and asks Manny what he expects will come next. Manny says that he might expect some explanation of cultural centers, or perhaps an example of cultural centers. After Manny hears the second sentence, he says that China-town and Little Havana are examples of cultural centers. Based on this audience response, Ming decides that the new information in sentence two is expected–even though the given is not repeated. He then tries the test again, this time with Patricia.

After Ming reads the first sentence to Patricia, she also says that she might expect some discussion of cultural centers that still have their personal identity, or maybe some examples of this. To Ming's surprise, however, after Patricia hears the second sentence, she is confused and asks, "If China-town is in China, how is it an example of an American cultural center?" Ming realizes that Patricia doesn't know that China-town is in America. He decides to add given information so that his text works not only for classmates like Manny, but also for those with Patricia's knowledge about China-town. He revises his text to include the

explicit given information that will link China-town to "cultural centers such as Minnesota":

Revision for Patricia: *That's* not to say that cultural centers such as Minnesota and the Midwest remain as they were in Scandinavia, but that Lady Liberty does not rid those immigrants of their personal identify. *Consider these American cultural centers:* China-town is no Beijing, just as Little Havana is no actual Havana.

As this scenario with Ming, Manny, and Patricia demonstrates, anticipating the reader's response is essential to shaping text, but not sufficient. To finalize one's choices about how to present the given information, the writer must see the effects of his or her choices on a reader and then revise accordingly.

Admittedly, having an intended reader in mind and knowing that reader is not always an easily met imperative. The solution, however, is not to accept this fact and write into a void. Rather, if writing is to be an effective act of communication, the solution is to look into the void and find out as much as possible about the reader and, from whatever little is there, infer a reader and anticipate how that reader will interpret the text. In the worst case scenario, the writer may, with very little knowledge of the reader, have to make a decision: whether to leave out the given and err on the side of confusion or include the given and err on the side of clarity. Whichever decision the writer makes, the next best step is to try it out on several readers to gauge the effect.

### Problem 5. If Words Are Repeated, Are They Always Given, or Might They Be Part of New Information?

Repeated words can cause confusion when it comes to determining if an idea is given or new. Consider this first sentence from a middle paragraph of a student research paper on AIDS.[8] The given information is underlined; the problematic information bolded and preceded by ??.

(7) Not only is there a strong connection of identification between the audience and the characters, but this

connection could be considered the same **??vicarious connection that Herek and Capitanio define.**

The first clause of this sentence repeats information from the preceding paragraph, so that the writer can easily identify it as given information. In the second clause, "this connection" functions as given information because it refers back to the "strong connection" in the previous clause, and "could be considered the same" presents new information. Now the problems begin: in "vicarious connection," part of the information, "connection," is in the previous text. In addition, "Herek," "Capitanio," and "vicarious" have all appeared earlier in the paper. At the same time, the writer may feel that the whole phrase, "the same vicarious connection that Herek and Capitanio define," does not appear in previous text.

A similar type of confusion is briefly noted by Clark and Haviland, who observe that "definite noun phrases could occur as part of the new information, contrary to the fact that most definite noun phrases convey given information" (12). Ultimately, they dismiss the confusion as an "apparent" rather than "real" problem. A closer look, however, reveals that this confusion results from attending to words rather than ideas. If one considers only the repetition of a definite noun phrase, then the focus is on words; however, if one recognizes that the definite noun phrase becomes part of something larger, then it seems that what is really at issue is the idea as a whole. Using this observation to refine the definition of new information can help writing students and instructors distinguish given and new information.

Among linguists and writing scholars, significantly more time and words are devoted to given information than to new information. Vande Kopple, who among the language-oriented writing scholars offers the most on new information, defines it as "information in a sentence that is not previously known to all, that is not obvious from the rhetorical situation, that is not mentioned prior to that sentence, or that is not recoverable from earlier material" (172). It is, most broadly, information that is not given.

Considering it more deeply, Vande Kopple (along with Hancock, Kolln, Noguchi, Rossen-Knill, and Williams) recognize that not all new information is created equal: one sentence may have several pieces of new information, some of which may be of minimal importance, and some, of great importance. How writers might decide to order these units for best effect relates to another high pay-off discourse pattern–end-focus. According to the end-focus expectation, readers expect to find the most important information at the end of a sentence (Rossen-Knill, Vande Kopple, Nogucchi, Hancock, Kolln, Williams). Consider this excerpt from example 6, along with an alternate version (new information is bolded):

(8) a. [C]hange is ubiquitous, necessary, and the foundation for this country.
b. [C]hange is ubiquitous, the foundation for this country, and necessary.

Version (a) leaves the reader feeling that the writer will go on to talk about the foundation for this country, that this theme is now the most important. Version (b), however, leaves the reader feeling that the most important point is the *need* for change. What accounts for these different feelings is the end-focus principle, the expectation that the most important piece of new information will appear at the end.

Further characterizing new information, Vande Kopple distinguishes between unused information and brand-new information (see also Prince for discussion of this distinction.) As suggested by the names, unused information is familiar to the reader, such as a moon or sun might be, but new to the piece of writing, whereas brand-new information is completely new to the reader–both in the world and the piece of writing (173). This distinction recalls Noguchi's idea of familiar information that needs to be reactivated, as well as Chafe's definition of given-new, which revolves around the presence or absence of information in the reader's consciousness. Accordingly, unused information is

that which has at one point been established for the reader, but is inactive, whereas brand new information is that which is completely unknown to the reader. For the student and writing instructor, this distinction is helpful for two reasons. First, it allows the writer to understand that new information is not simply information that is completely new, but rather may be previously established, inactive information. Importantly, the brand-new/unused distinction again highlights the importance of audience: what is brand new to one reader may be unused information to another reader.

Despite the usefulness of the brand-new/unused distinction, it does not address the issue of repeated information in example 7. A third category is needed, what might be called *newly-used information*. *Newly-used information* refers to information that has appeared in the text or is otherwise known by the reader and writer and activated as part of a related idea, but then appears again as part of a new idea. The following definition captures all three kinds of new information. New information may be 1) completely new to the reader: not established by previous text and not understood by the situation, 2) unused: familiar to the reader but new to the text and not active in the reader's consciousness, or 3) newly used: information that incorporates given information as part of a brand-new or unused idea.

Re-presenting the above discussion of new information as a series of prompts offers a test that can help the writer work out the status of "vicarious connection that Herek and Capitanio define" in example (7).

***How to Determine if Information is New***

Step 1. Is the information, in this case "vicarious connection that Herek and Capitanio define," brand new: is it completely new to the reader, that is, not established by previous text, not understood from the situation, and not predictable? If yes, then it is new information. If no, move on to step 2.

The writer, Kevin, who is writing to his classmate, knows that parts of the information, "connection" and "Herek and Capitanio

define," have been discussed in the paper, so the information is not brand new.

Step 2. Is the information unused new information: is it familiar to the reader but not activated? If yes then it is new information. If no, move on to step 3.

Kevin thinks that parts of the information, "connection" and "Herek and Capitanio define" are both familiar to the reader and activated, as they were very recently discussed in the paper. The information is not unused new information.

Step 3. Is the information newly used: does it incorporate given information into a new idea? If yes, then it is new information.

Kevin sees that he is using familiar information ("connection," "Herek and Capitanio define") as part of a new idea: the same vicarious connection that Herek and Capitanio define. He decides that it is new information and is appropriately placed after the given information.

What may be becoming apparent is that given and new are not clear opposites, but rather exist on a spectrum: at one end, given information is highly activated in the reader's mind and highly expected by the reader, and thus recovered through minimal inferencing. At the other end, new information must be provided by the writer because it is not otherwise known or recoverable or predictable by the reader. Because given and new exist on a spectrum, and because communication always involves some degree of inferencing (Sperber and Wilson), there will always be some degree of uncertainty about whether or not information is given or new. The degree of that uncertainty will depend on how well the writer knows and can assess the knowledge base of the reader. Through recognizing and making this uncertainty visible, writing instructors can transform a given-new lesson on text cohesion into a demonstration and discussion of the writer's need for audience and thus, the value of peer review. More generally, offering students a nuanced understanding of given-new potentially leads to an enhanced sensitivity to flow during the revision process. Flow–a function of cohesion across sentences–does not emerge from the connection between one sentence and

another, but more precisely, from the reader's ability to work out those connections easily. Thus, the successful reviser anticipates the reader's ability and shapes the text accordingly.

## Notes

[1] I advise against asking students to attend to the given-new process during early stages of the writing process, as it may well interfere with the ability to produce and develop texts.

[2] Example and discussion adapted from "Creating and Manipulating Fictional Worlds: A Taxonomy of Dialogue in Fiction." (See Rossen-Knill)

[3] For a detailed discussion of the relationship between text clarity (degree of effort to work out a message) and cognitive gain (degree of worth of the message to the audience), see Rossen-Knill and Bakhmetyeva.

[4] Elbow refers readers to chapters 11 and 12 of his book for instruction on how to revise through reading aloud. See Peter Elbow, *Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing* (New York: Oxford UP, 2012), 96.

[5] Chafe makes the important point that terminology works against understanding how given and new information work: old or given wrongly suggest that *any* information that the writer and reader share is old. Perhaps because of the long history of given (old, familiar) and new in the linguistic literature, Chafe concedes to the idea that the terminology is unlikely to change.

[6] For detailed consideration and empirical data related to text coherence, see Givón "The Grammar Referential Coherence as Mental Processing Instructions."

[7] As one reads this example and the following discussion, it is important to realize that revising for the given-new expectation will not on its own create an interesting and effective text; it will, however, begin to engage writers in meaningful discussions of their sentence-level choices, help them see why these matter, and ease the way into additional discussions about other writing choices and their effects on readers.

[8] This paper argues that the play *Rent* builds sympathy for and acceptance of persons with AIDS. The previous paragraph discusses the strong connection between film and book characters and the audience.

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