



Adding Emphasis

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Visual Devices for Achieving Emphasis

In the days before computerized word processing and desktop publishing, the publishing process began with a manuscript and/or a typescript that was sent to a print shop where it would be prepared for publication and printed. In order to show emphasis, to highlight the title of a book, to refer to a word itself as a word, or to indicate a foreign word or phrase, the writer would use underlining in the typescript, which would signal the typesetter at the print shop to use *italic* font for those words. Even today, perhaps the simplest way to call attention to an otherwise unemphatic word or phrase is to underline or italicize it.

Flaherty is the new committee chair, not Buckley.
This mission is extremely important for our future: *we must not fail* !

Because writers using computers today have access to a wide variety of fonts and textual effects, they are no longer limited to underlining to show emphasis. Still, especially for academic writing, italics or underlining is the preferred way to emphasize words or phrases when necessary. Writers usually choose one or the other method and use it consistently throughout an individual essay. In the final, published version of an article or book, italics are usually used. Writers in academic discourses and students learning to write academic papers are expected to express emphasis primarily through words themselves; overuse of various emphatic devices like changes of font face and size, boldface, all-capitals, and so on in the text of an essay creates the impression of a writer relying on flashy effects instead of clear and precise writing to make a point.

Boldface is also used, especially outside of academia, to show emphasis as well as to highlight items in a list, as in the following examples.

The picture that television commercials portray of the American home is **far from realistic**.

The following three topics will be covered:

topic 1: brief description of topic 1
topic 2: brief description of topic 2
topic 3: brief description of topic 3

Some writers use ALL-CAPITAL letters for emphasis, but they are usually unnecessary and can cause writing to appear cluttered and loud. In email correspondence, the use of all-caps throughout a message can create the unintended impression of shouting and is therefore discouraged.

Punctuation Marks for Achieving Emphasis

Some punctuation marks prompt the reader to give a word or sentence more than usual emphasis. For example, a command with a period does not evoke the same emphatic response as the same command with an exclamation mark.

Watch out!

A dash or colon has more emphatic force than a comma.

The employees were surprised by the decision, which was not to change company policy.
The employees were surprised by the decision--no change in company policy.
The employees were surprised by the decision: no change in company policy.

Choice and Arrangement of Words for Achieving Emphasis

The simplest way to emphasize something is to tell readers directly that what follows is important by using such words and phrases as *especially* , *particularly* , *crucially* , *most importantly* , and *above all* .

Emphasis by repetition of key words can be especially effective in a series, as in the following example.

See your good times come to color in minutes: pictures protected by an elegant finish, pictures you can take with an instant flash, pictures that can be made into beautiful enlargements.

When a pattern is established through repetition and then broken, the varied part will be emphasized, as in the following example.

Murtz Rent-a-car is first in reliability, first in service, and last in customer complaints.

Besides disrupting an expectation set up by the context, you can also emphasize part of a sentence by departing from the basic

structural patterns of the language. The inversion of the standard subject-verb-object pattern in the first sentence below into an object-subject-verb pattern in the second places emphasis on the out-of-sequence term, *fifty dollars*.

I'd make fifty dollars in just two hours on a busy night at the restaurant.
Fifty dollars I'd make in just two hours on a busy night at the restaurant.

The initial and terminal positions of sentences are inherently more emphatic than the middle segment. Likewise, the main clause of a complex sentence receives more emphasis than subordinate clauses. Therefore, you should put words that you wish to emphasize near the beginnings and endings of sentences and should never bury important elements in subordinate clauses. Consider the following example.

No one can deny that the computer has had a great effect upon the business world.
Undeniably, the effect of the computer upon the business world has been great.

In the first version of this sentence, "No one can deny" and "on the business world" are in the most emphasized positions. In addition, the writer has embedded the most important ideas in a subordinate clause: "that the computer has had a great effect." The edited version places the most important ideas in the main clause and in the initial and terminal slots of the sentence, creating a more engaging prose style.

Arrangement of Clauses for Achieving Emphasis

Since the terminal position in the sentence carries the most weight and since the main clause is more emphatic than a subordinate clause in a complex sentence, writers often place the subordinate clause before the main clause to give maximal emphasis to the main clause. For example:

I believe both of these applicants are superb even though it's hard to find good secretaries nowadays.
Even though it's hard to find good secretaries nowadays, I believe both of these applicants are superb.

Sentence Position and Variation for Achieving Emphasis

An abrupt short sentence following a long sentence or a sequence of long sentences is often emphatic. For example, compare the following paragraphs. The second version emphasizes an important idea by placing it in an independent clause and placing it at the end of the paragraph:

For a long time, but not any more, Japanese corporations used Southeast Asia merely as a cheap source of raw materials, as a place to dump outdated equipment and overstocked merchandise, and as a training ground for junior executives who needed minor league experience.

For a long time Japanese corporations used Southeast Asia merely as a cheap source of raw materials, as a place to dump outdated equipment and overstocked merchandise, and as a training ground for junior executives who needed minor league experience. But those days have ended.

Varying a sentence by using a question after a series of statements is another way of achieving emphasis.

The increased number of joggers, the booming sales of exercise bicycles and other physical training devices, the record number of entrants in marathon races--all clearly indicate the growing belief among Americans that strenuous, prolonged exercise is good for their health. But is it?

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