

Point Fronting in Speaking and Writing

In complex discourse (in speaking or writing, when one main idea is supported by at least one supporting idea), if you “front your point,” it’s much easier for your reader or listener to understand what you’re trying to say.

Definitions

discourse: 담화의 연속체

assertion: 주장

complex discourse: discourse that has a main idea and supporting ideas.

hierarchy: 계급 제도, 분류 단계

hierarchical level: (in composition) one idea’s relationship to the other ideas in discourse; for example, the main idea is at the highest level, an idea that explains or supports the main idea is at the second level, an idea that explains or supports a second-level idea is at the third level, and so on.

detail: a lower-level idea (a fact or an assertion) that explains or supports a higher level idea.

support: an ideas or group of ideas that give credibility to an assertion; however, the word support can also mean ideas or group of ideas that both clarify (explain) and give credibility to an assertion.

What is a “point”?

The word point has several definitions and uses. (These uses may have originated in “point’s” most basic meaning, “spot” — 점.) Here are a few definitions of point (*with examples in italics*), from *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*.

1. an assertion (주장) (*One of the points in your argument is illogical.*)
2. the most important essential in a discussion or matter (요점) (*In class the teacher blabbers on and on, and after an hour we realize that we can’t understand the point of all that blabber.*)
3. an end or object to be achieved (purpose) (*What’s the point of saving money if you can’t enjoy it?*)
4. a narrowly localized place having a precisely indicated position (*You’ll come to a junction, and at that point you should turn right.*)
5. an exact moment (*Soon you will get a letter from her, and at that point you should phone her.*)
6. the tip of something (*He stabbed me in the arm with the point of his pencil.*)

In the English Language Program we will be using the word point very often. We will use the word in the senses of definitions 1~5.

However, in this article about point fronting, we are using the word point in only two senses; one sense is that of definition 1 (assertion), and the other sense is that of definition 2 (요점).

Actually, the points in definitions 1 and 2 are *both* assertions; the difference between them is in their hierarchical roles in complex discourse: one assertion can support another assertion. Which role a point plays depends on its hierarchical level. One lower-level point (the “assertion” of definition 1) can support a higher-level point (the “most important essential” of definition 2). In the sentences below, all of the points are assertions, but points *b* and *c* support point *a*:

- a. He’s a poor politician.
- b. He’s ignorant.
- c. He’s corrupt.
- d. In 2004 he was convicted of receiving bribery.

An idea’s hierarchical role is relative to its context. In a paragraph, point *a* can be the main idea; at the same time, if that paragraph is in a book, point *a* can be a supporting idea.

Level numbering: In complex discourse, spoken or written, we have several “levels” of ideas. We have the main idea (*a* is “Level 1”) and we have ideas that support the main idea (*b* and *c* are “Level 2”), and we have ideas that support the supporting ideas (*d*, which supports *c*, is “Level 3”), and so on.

Conventionally, we also refer to supporting points as “supporting details.” A detail can be either an assertion or a fact. Above, *a*, *b* and *c* are assertions; *d* is a fact. In good writing, assertions are explained/supported by facts or other (lower-level) assertions. Facts are also called “concrete support”; assertions are also called “logical support.” (Please read “Assertion or Fact?” at E>G, Composition.)

Front your point

In complex discourse, if you “front your point” it’s much easier for your reader or listener to understand what you’re trying to say. Point fronting means presenting your point before you present the details that explain or support your point; you present your Level 1 point before you present your Level 2 point, and you present your Level 2 point before you present your Level 3 point—and so on. In fact, if you don’t front your point, your counterpart (your reader or listener) may never really know what you’re trying to get across. If, for example, in

speaking you go on and on presenting supporting details, your counterpart will find it difficult to see the relevance of your details without first hearing the point that the details are leading to. Or your counterpart may lose interest after you present three or four details, and interrupt you before you get to your point. More likely than losing interest is the tendency of many people to think that they know the other's point before it is even uttered; so they interrupt. And many people are just impatient; they want to express their opinion and can't wait till the other completes his point.

In writing, too, if you don't front your point, your reader will get confused. After you present two supporting details, your reader will say, "Wait a minute! Why are you saying that? What does that have to do with what you were talking about?"

There certainly are situations that require you to present supporting details before you present your point. If you think that your counterpart will reject your main idea, it might be better to present your supporting details before you present your point. Or your supporting details might be very seductive and act as a good way to get your counterpart into an receptive state of mind. However, if you don't have the ability to present the supporting details quickly and smoothly, your counterpart will take control of the discourse from you.

An example of a delayed point

In English 2, Unit 10, the students wrote a paragraph that illustrated their opinion on who was responsible for the death of a lady named Karen. In the paragraph presented here, the main point (Level 1 point) is properly presented in the topic sentence. The major supporting points (Level 2 points) are properly presented briefly in the second or “bridge” sentence. In the sentences that follow the second sentence — in the “body” of the paragraph — the author intended to explain each supporting point. The major supporting points, however, are not fronted — they’re delayed. In body of this paragraph, can you identify the sentences that present the Level 2 ideas (the major supporting points)?

1) Karen’s husband Jack is probably responsible for her death. 2) He seems to be responsible because he had a motive to kill her and he performed the act that killed her. 3) He was in love with Sadie, the new young female employee at the company where Karen was employed. 4) And Karen was old and fat, and he was tired of being married to her. 5) It’s likely that he wanted to get rid of her. 6) There’s another reason for believing that Jack is responsible. 7) When Detective DesMaisons asked Jack what flavor ice cream he liked, he replied that he liked chocolate. 8) He lied, though, because when DesMaisons asked him later what flavor ice cream he could buy Jack, he replied that he would have vanilla. 9) His lie tells us that he bought the chocolate ice cream that killed Karen and that he bought it in order to give it to Karen. 10) He knew that Karen might die if she ate chocolate ice cream, because she suffered from diabetes, and diabetics shouldn’t eat sweet things like chocolate. 11) So he probably gave her the chocolate. 12) For these two reasons I believe that Jack has responsibility for his wife Karen’s death.

Sentence 5 expresses the first major supporting point, that Jack had a motive to kill Karen. Sentences 3 and 4 are supporting points (Level 3 points) that explain the first major supporting point (motive). The writer should have positioned sentence 5 as the third sentence.

Sentence 10 expresses the second major supporting point, that, by giving her the chocolate, Jack performed the act that killed her. Sentences 7~10 are supporting points (Level 3) that explain the second major supporting point.

An example of fronted major points

1) Karen’s husband Jack is probably responsible for her death. 2) He seems to be responsible because he had a motive to kill her and he performed the act that killed her. 3) It’s likely that he wanted to get rid of her. 4) He was in love with Sadie, the new young female employee at the company where Karen was employed. 5) And Karen was old and fat, and he was tired of being married to her. 6) There’s another reason for believing that Jack is responsible: He probably gave her the chocolate. 7) When Detective DesMaisons asked Jack what flavor ice cream he liked, he replied that he liked chocolate. 8) He lied, though, because when DesMaisons asked him later what flavor ice cream he could buy Jack, he replied that he would have vanilla. 9) His lie tells us that he bought the chocolate ice cream that killed Karen and that he bought it in order to give it to Karen. 10) He knew that Karen might die if she ate chocolate ice cream, because she suffered from diabetes, and diabetics shouldn’t eat sweet things like chocolate. 11) Knowing that Jack had a motive and the means, we can be pretty sure that he has responsibility for his wife Karen’s death.

Lower-level points also need to be fronted.

In the second major supporting point in the paragraph immediately above, the supporting details for the major support are still not presented in the proper sequence. Even the lower-level supporting points (“details”) need proper fronting. The idea in sentence 8 explains the idea in sentence 9; in other words, sentence 9’s idea is the point that is explained by sentence 8. Therefore, we should position sentence 9’s idea before sentence 8’s idea, like this:

There’s another reason for believing that Jack is responsible: He probably gave her the chocolate. When Detective DesMaisons asked Jack what flavor ice cream he liked, he replied that he liked chocolate. He lied, and his lie tells us that he bought the chocolate ice cream that killed Karen and that he bought it in order to give it to Karen. We know he lied because, when DesMaisons asked him later what flavor ice cream he could buy Jack, he replied that he would have vanilla. He knew that Karen might die if she ate chocolate ice cream, because she suffered from diabetes, and diabetics shouldn’t eat sweet things like chocolate.

Assertion or fact?

In the paragraph above, can you distinguish between facts and assertions?

Facts

When Detective DesMaisons asked Jack what flavor ice cream he liked, he replied that he liked chocolate.

...when DesMaisons asked him later what flavor ice cream he could buy Jack, he replied that he would have vanilla.

...she suffered from diabetes, and diabetics shouldn’t eat sweet things like chocolate.

Assertions

There's another reason for believing that Jack is responsible: He probably gave her the chocolate. He lied, and his lie tells us that he bought the chocolate ice cream that killed Karen and that he bought it in order to give it to Karen.

We know he lied because,

Fact or assertion?

He knew that Karen might die if she ate chocolate ice cream