

The focus of information in a sentence

The focus of information in a sentence

(a) Grammatical theme (within a sentence)

The sentence theme, which is the information before the main verb in a sentence, usually tells us what the sentence is about, or what the writer wants the reader to focus on. It is a signpost saying to the reader, "This is what I want you to pay attention to". Themes can be:

- The subject, e.g., Mat usually does Rob's car on a Saturday afternoon...
- Conjunctions, e.g., Until the two years is up....
- Elements of an interpersonal nature, e.g., Amazingly, the back wall of the garage is OK....
- Experiential elements such as prepositions, e.g., By the end, he's sweating and puffing....
- Adverbial elements of circumstance, e.g., By 1840, many missionaries had settled....

Theme (within a sentence) as a source of difficulty in comprehension

Students need to understand that a variety of linguistic elements can serve as sentence themes. They also need to understand that a writer will move an element to the front of the clause to give it emphasis, e.g., "The waters around New Zealand are abundant in delicious seafood such as squid. Although not easy to prepare, squid are..."

(b) New and "given" information

There are usually two types of information in a sentence. One part tells us something new. The other part tells us something that we are aware of already (either from a previous sentence or from our general knowledge), in other words, its information is given.

- A: Where did you put your bike?
- B: I left it / at my friend's house.

The first part of B's sentence is "given" (by A); the second part is new. "Given" information tells us what a sentence is about; it usually provides the sentence theme which appears first in a sentence. New information, however, provides the point where we expect people to pay extra attention.

New and given information as sources of difficulty in comprehension

Students will need to understand that, although given information is usually in the theme position, new information is sometimes the theme.

- Electricity makes light by....
- Candles make light by....
- The sun makes light by....

When this is the case, as it sometimes is in texts written for young children, tracking the development of the text is made more difficult. Difficulty in comprehension can also occur when texts are written in ways that inadvertently draw the reader's attention away from new information. In the following example, the theme contains new information, vital to the completion of a task, but the word 'After' draws attention away from the new information.

- After reading the text,
- complete the chart.

Instead, the instruction should read:

- Read the text,
- then complete the chart.

Published on *Assessment Resource Banks* (<https://arbs.nzcer.org.nz>)