

IV - Model-Driven Writing

12. Thinking Critically: English as a Visual Communication System

You can improve your writing by using well-written and carefully edited articles — published in magazines and newspapers or on the Internet — as models.

12. Paying Attention to Professional Writing Models

12.1 Critical Thinking: How the English Language Works

Pay attention to what you read. Not just the content: comprehension is largely a passive activity. That's why we have so many people who test smart but can't write smart. By "pay attention," I mean **develop the habit** of observing the **structural techniques** at work in writing that you find interesting and persuasive.

For our purposes here, let's return to the Associated Press article that we considered briefly on page 71 — only this time, we'll look at the whole thing.

Nigerian Oil Workers Suspend Walkout

LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) — Nigerian oil workers suspended a walkout after union leaders reported progress in talks with the government to end a general strike over rising fuel prices.

The 5-day-old strike has paralyzed businesses and some airlines in Africa's most populous nation. Nigeria is Africa's leading oil producer and the fifth largest supplier of crude to the United States.

Peter Akpatason, president of the main blue-collar oil workers' union, said its members were asked to return to work amid negotiations to end the strike. He said the 29-union Nigeria Labor Congress will meet on Saturday to consider the proposal.

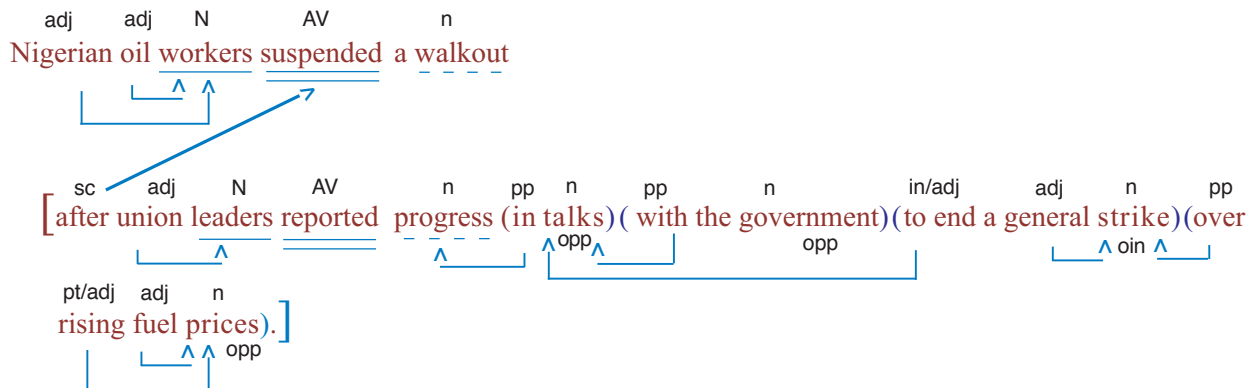
Another oil union, this one representing administrative workers who have threatened to strike by Sunday, also expressed satisfaction with the progress of negotiations.

Unions called the strike to press President Olusegun Obasanjo's government to rescind a 50 percent fuel price hike ordered on June 20. Officials said the price rise was necessary to end shortages and curb smuggling of cheaper Nigerian fuel to neighboring countries.

On pages 19–52, we saw examples of the four dominant sentence patterns. But what about the four phrases, four clauses, punctuation, and other components that are critical elements in the complex process of presenting ideas clearly? If we are going to use this article, or any article, as a model, we need to be able to recognize how all of the pieces fit together.

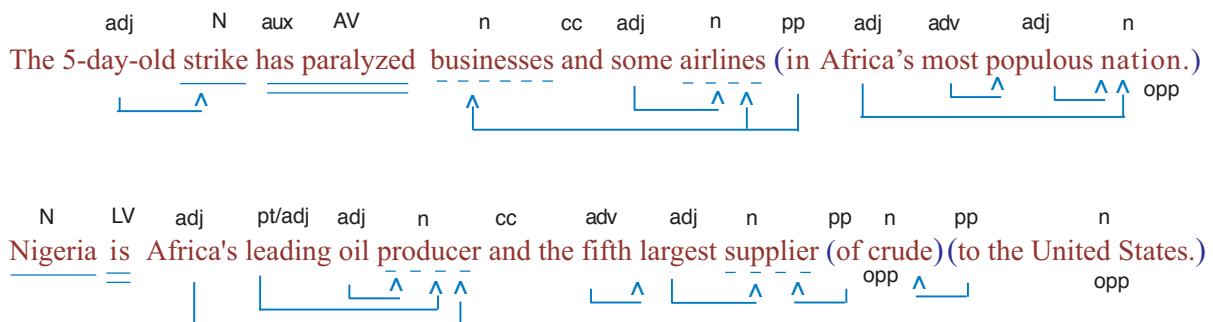
When we write sentences that express ideas clearly, each element relates to other elements in the sentence in specific ways. One objective of the **Write Smart System** is to help you see how these elements work together — by using the **OS^E** blueprints to understand how the organizing principles operate within the system.

The Lead Sentence: Connecting Subject–Action Verb–Complement Patterns



This sentence is easy to follow because the elements in the sentence fit together logically: strong subject-action verb-complement relationships; clauses tied together with a connecting word — *after* — that adds a **condition**; and just enough supporting information, in the form of descriptive words and phrases, to present a clear picture of a complicated series of events.

The Next Two Sentences: Action Verb–Complement, Linking Verb–Complement



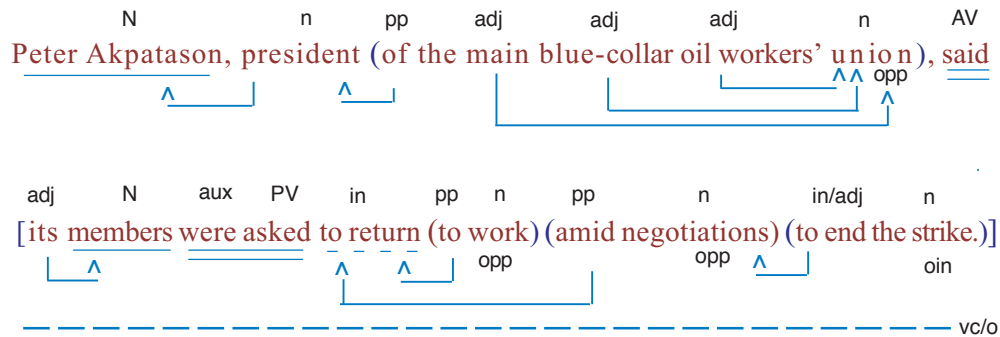
The second sentence follows the subject–action verb–complement pattern (actually, two complements, *producer* and *supplier*); the third sentence follows the subject–linking verb–complement pattern. If you study these **OS^E** blueprints, you can see how all the pieces fit together. Paying attention to the complex relationships that are inherent in the language can help you learn how to play the **Game of GrammaTecture** and the **Game of GrammaText** — to build sentences that other people will find clear, concise, and interesting.

• **Fourth Sentence: An Appositive and a Noun Clause** •

Peter Akpatason, president of the main blue-collar oil workers' union, said its members were asked to return to work amid negotiations to end the strike.

In this sentence, we see further evidence of how good writers put complex language elements together to create sentences that are easy to follow.

We are looking at two clauses: the main clause — *Peter Akpatason . . . said* (with the appositive *president of the main blue-collar union* serving as a bridge between the two); and a noun clause— *its members were asked to return to work amid negotiations to end the strike* — which acts as the complement of *Peter Akpatason . . . said*. The verb of the noun clause is passive — *were asked* — and the verb complement is the infinitive *to return*.

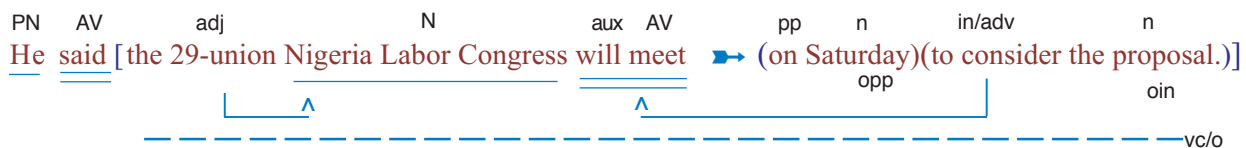


Note that in the first clause, the combinations *blue-collar* and *oil workers'* (both referring to *union*) function as single-word adjectives. And in the second clause, the passive verb — the only one in the article — works perfectly. The second clause is a noun clause with the introductory relative (*that*) understood.

• **Fifth Sentence: Noun Clause, Subject–Action Verb–Phrase** •

He said the 29-union Nigeria Labor Congress will meet on Saturday to consider the proposal.

We are again looking at a main clause followed by a noun clause. This time, though, the sentence pattern of the noun clause is subject–action verb–phrase.



12.2 Practical Solutions: From the Grammatical to the Dramatic

Paying attention to grammatical relationships will enable you to translate your ideas into sentences and paragraphs that are well-organized and easy to follow. But understanding how the elements of English operate as a communication system — and putting your understanding to work by applying fundamental professional writing techniques — will also help you deliver information that readers find interesting and persuasive.

In the first sentence of the Associated Press article, we saw the critical roles played by the subject-action verb-complement relationship and the connecting word *after*. What's just as important is that the writer has applied the principles of syntax, described in 4.2.4 ("From Clarity to Emphasis") to build the sentence to a strong conclusion.

Nigerian oil workers suspended a walkout after union leaders reported progress in talks with the government to end a general **strike over rising fuel prices**.

This what Strunk and White meant when they said, "Put the emphatic words of a sentence at the end." Building the sentence to a strong conclusion is the natural result of understanding and applying the architecture of the language. When you allow the logic of the language to do the work, you end up with a sentence that carries the reader into the next sentence. We can see this principle at work again in the third paragraph . . .

Peter Akpatason, president of the main blue-collar oil workers' union, said its members were asked to return to work amid **negotiations to end the strike**. He said the 29-union Nigeria Labor Congress will meet on Saturday **to consider the proposal**.

. . . and in the next two paragraphs as well.

Another oil union, this one representing administrative workers who have threatened to strike by Sunday, also **expressed satisfaction with the progress of negotiations**.

Officials said the price rise was necessary to end shortages and **curb smuggling of cheaper Nigerian fuel to neighboring countries**.

I encourage you to spend some time studying the techniques at work in this article and other published material that engages your interest. You will find that most top professional writers and editors — consciously or intuitively — follow the principles we have been observing since 1.1 ("Smart = Simple"). By applying these principles to your own writing, you can develop strong critical thinking and communication skills that will last a lifetime.