Sentence Focus Exercises

At times we read something that doesn't make sense to us, or we write something ourselves, thinking "That's not what I meant to say" or "This doesn't sound right." Chances are that the writing isn't clearly focused on the subject or topic. Your readers will more easily understand your ideas if you focus them clearly, and it's really not so hard to do. Often clear focus in writing depends on clearly focused sentence subjects.

Read the following paragraph aloud:

Professor Seed suffered through a disastrous first day as a college professor. (a) The way in which he set his alarm clock was wrong, (b) so the early bus was missed and campus wasn't reached until 30 minutes after his first class began. (c) Then the classroom couldn't be found. (d) Help was given by many students, (e) but still the wrong classroom was appeared at by hint (f) Finally the realization came that his wallet was lost, (g) so bus fare had to be borrowed. (h) At home that night, his wife was told the reason he had a bad day was because the wrong foot was started off on.

This paragraph begins with a topic sentence, a sentence that tells the main idea of the paragraph. The topic sentence makes it clear that the subject of the paragraph will be Professor Seed, specifically his first day as a college professor. Yet the focus of the rest of the paragraph isn't clear because Professor Seed, the subject of the paragraph and the grammatical subject of the first sentence, never again appears as a sentence subject.

This paragraph, then, is unfocused; it's hard to figure out who did what. By focusing your sentences clearly, you can make sure that your reader understands who performs the action or form of be in the verb.

In this unit, you will work on applying guidelines for writing focused sentences, which in turn will help you to keep larger pieces of writing focused. The first guideline to follow is:

Ask yourself "What subject am I writing about?" Try to make the subject/topic of your writing the subject of your sentences. If you are writing about a person or people or human behavior, aim for personal sentence subjects.
Exercise 2: Exam Stress

Sigmund, a college student, is taking an exam in his psychology class, and one of his short essay questions reads:

*What are some of the causes of problems between parents and teenagers?*

Immediately Sigmund writes down some points he wants to include in his answer:

1. Rules and expectations aren't made clear.
2. Resentment occurs when chores aren't done.
3. Blame is placed on teenagers for anything that goes wrong in the home.
4. The way in which parents discipline is by yelling too much.
5. The complaint is that teenagers aren't listened to.
6. There isn't the recognition that parents are human beings too.
7. Enough respect isn't shown to parents.

Then Sigmund begins to write his answer:

“The causes of problems between parents and teenagers are ...”

but he gets stuck before he even begins to show what he knows. Why? He has begun by focusing his first sentence on the subject causes, an abstract word, and the verb are. It looks like he is going to name all of the causes of problems in one sentence.

Help Sigmund by writing a more clearly focused beginning sentence. Ask yourself *who's doing what?* and make your answer the subject of the sentence; aim for personal sentence subjects.

Write your beginning sentence here:
Exercise 3:
Who's to Blame?

Applying what you know about focusing sentences, now go back to the paragraph about Professor Seed and clarify the focus of the sentences in the paragraph. The original, unfocused sentences are given in parentheses.

EXAMPLE (a): ________________________________________________
(The way in which he set his alarm was incorrect)

SOLUTION: He incorrectly set his alarm clock.

b. _____________________________________________________________
(so the early bus was missed and campus wasn't reached until 30 minutes after his first class began.)

c. _____________________________________________________________
(Then the classroom couldn't be found.)

d. _____________________________________________________________
(Help was given by many students,)

e. _____________________________________________________________
(but still the wrong class was appeared at by him.)

f. _____________________________________________________________
(Finally the realization came that his wallet was lost.)

g. _____________________________________________________________
(so bus fare had to be borrowed.)

h. _____________________________________________________________
(At home that night, his wife was told that the reason he had a bad day was because the wrong foot was started off on.)