Style and Mechanics

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- Let go of the need to be "right." Questions of grammar can turn even the best of us into prescriptivists. The consultation is not a battle of wits, and the point is not to demonstrate your mastery of grammar. Suggest other possibilities, call attention to patterns you see as problems, but remember that the student should be in control of the final product, and that professors may have grammatical "hobby-horses" that are technically incorrect.
- **Forget the vocabulary.** Demonstrate to the student how their sentences might be clearer or more compelling, but avoid grammatical jargon. Explain why a sentence is awkward in language that makes sense to the student, instead of resorting to terms like "subordinate versus coordinate clauses," which tend to confuse and/or alienate. The goal is to develop a toolbox of things to look for, not a glossary of grammatical terms.
- Don't ignore the forest for the trees. Don't dwell on every single detail; you simply don't have the time. (Remember, you're neither an editor nor a proofreader.) Look for patterns of mistakes, and instead of trying to achieve a perfect, polished product, find ways to make the student a better writer. Looking for patterns instead of individual mistakes will also prepare you to help talented writers, who might re-use the same sentence constructions again or again, or have writerly habits they haven't yet noticed.
- **Identify, model, then supervise.** Once you've identified the pattern, demonstrate to the student how the sentence might be differently written, then find a similar problem and ask the student to fix it him/herself.
- **Break down or build up.** Are the sentences overwritten, wordy, unclear? Then break them down: identify the subjects and the predicates (who's kicking what?), and bring them to the forefront. Are the sentences trite, too short, or do they all follow the same pattern? Then demonstrate ways to join related ideas, to vary the sentence structures and make the writing more engaging.
 - **EX 1:** The knowledge that criminalization of marijuana use can lead to a wide variety of other social ills, including an increased risk of addiction to more dangerous and expensive drugs such as heroin and cocaine, has not prevented lawmakers from positioning marijuana as a "gateway drug."

- **EX 2:** There are a number of studies that show that socializing health care is a bad idea because it leads to inefficiency and higher costs.
- **EX 3:** The greatest writer of the Renaissance was William Shakespeare. His best-known work is probably Romeo and Juliet. Hamlet is also famous. Shakespeare was a playwright. He also wrote poetry. He is better known for his plays.

CHRONIC PROBLEMS TO LOOK FOR

Subject-predicate drift.

EX 1 (from the *San Francisco Chronicle*): The baby was delivered Tuesday by Caesarean section. With the approval of the infant's family, the respirator that had kept the mother's heart and lungs functioning for sixty-four days so the baby could live in her womb was turned off.

Passive voice. Remember that the passive voice has entirely valid uses.

- **EX 1** (from *The Vikings*, by James Graham-Campbell and Dafydd Kidd): The Vikings have had a bad press. Their activities are equated with rape and pillage and their reputation for brutality is second only to that of the Huns and the Goths. Curiously, they also have been invested with a strange glamour which contradicts in many ways their fearsome image.
- **EX 2:** Green River Killer Convicted
- **EX 3:** Early this morning a campus van was hit by a delivery truck traveling at high speed through the intersection of James Avenue and Water Street.
- **EX 4:** The solution was titrated with a 0.2211 molar NaOH solution, and pH was monitored throughout the titration.
- **EX 5:** When the subject was resistant to following the investigator's instructions, the experiment was terminated.
- **EX 6:** That visit from Santa was an occurrence that would never be forgotten.

Abstract nouns, vague pronouns and do-little verbs. Use definite, concrete nouns, and avoid verbs that don't do anything (is, be, are, make, find, show, does, gets).

- **EX 1:** Contemporary approaches to the situation in Crimea are unsatisfactory. One of the problems about this is how we talk about it; They aren't our enemy the way it was, but things change slowly.
- **EX 2:** This paper is an analysis of the problem, and gives a solution.
- **EX 3:** Schools that perform best on standardized tests are already well-funded. This shows one problem with merit-based funding.

Noun gluttony.

EX 1 (from a directive of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration [OSHA]): Ways of exit access and the doors to exits to which they lead shall be so designed and arranged as to be clearly recognizable as such. (original)

An exit must be free of signs or decorations that obscure its visibility. (revised)

EX 2 (from a New York State fire report): Heavy rains throughout most of the State have given an optimistic outlook for lessened fire danger for the rest of the season. However, an abundance of lightning maintains a certain amount of hazard in isolated areas that have not received an excessive amount of rain. We were pleased to have been able to help Nevada with the suppression of their conflagration.

Preposition abuse. Avoid "ticky-tacking" sentences together with prepositional phrases.

EX 1: At this point in time, Mars is the target of the modern astronaut. By reason of its relative closeness to Earth, Mars is being studied by scientists for the purposes of a future mission. In a manner similar to the earlier study of the Moon by scientists, a probe is planned to be sent by NASA to within the immediate vicinity of the planet with a view toward collecting data with respect to the atmosphere of the planet. NASA plans to send in excess of one dozen of these probes during the course of the next five years.

Misplaced modifiers. Ensure that adverbs are next to the word they actually modify.

EX 1: I almost failed every art class I took

vs.

I failed almost every art class I took.

EX 2: Only she told me that she fantasized about me.

She only told me that she fantasized about me.

She told only me that she fantasized about me.

She told me only that she fantasized about me.

She told me that only she fantasized about me.

She told me that she only fantasized about me.

She told me that she fantasized about only me.

Dangling participles.

EX 1: In San Diego, the "in" place for years has been McDini's for corned beef. Thinly sliced and heaped on rye, corned beef lovers won't be disappointed.

EX 2: For over a half-century Rumpelmayer's has been one of New York's most popular ice-cream parlors. Decorated with cuddly stuffed animals and trimmed with large pink velvet bows, you feel like you're sitting inside a present.

EX 3: Abraham Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg address while traveling from Washington to Gettysburg on the back of an envelope.

EX 4: From the Los Angeles Times: Pop star Whitney Houston will make her first Southern California concert appearance since the birth of her daughter at the Hollywood Bowl on August 22.

EX 5: Being a Religion major, Hinduism has always been fascinating.

Incorrect parallelisms.

EX 1: This new exercise program and going on a strict diet will make me healthier.

EX 2: With his searing wheat fields, bright sunflowers, and skies that are blazing yellow, Vincent van Gogh was fanatic about light.

Needlessly watered-down arguments.

- **EX 1:** In my opinion, our current immigration policy may be misguided.
- **EX 2:** Though he remained above the fray, he didn't seem to have lost his taste for pop culture.

Unnecessary adverbs.

- **EX 1:** Utterly reject, screeched loudly, rudely insulted, gently caressing, stumbled awkwardly.
- **EX 2:** Sylvia very hurriedly scribbled her name and phone number on the back of a greasy napkin.

SOME PARTING SHOTS REGARDING PUNCTUATION:

Commas are sometimes a matter of taste. Thanks to the history of punctuation, commas can function grammatically, but also temporally. If you're confused as to whether a comma is needed or not, it may be because the sentence is correct either way. Keep in mind, though, that a comma should never divide a subject and verb, or come between a verb and its object.

- **EX 1:** All duly registered members of this exclusive English equestrian club, are permitted unlimited access to the club's stables and pubs.
- **EX 2:** The mugger was stunned to find that the elegant businessman had in his pockets, only three dollars and half a liverwurst sandwich.
- **EX 3:** The only thing the lottery winners wanted was, to live their lives as they had before becoming millionaires.

It's OK if a prepositional phrase (two commas) divides them, of course.

EX: All duly registered members of this exclusive English equestrian club, except new members, are permitted unlimited access to the club's stables and pubs.

Know the difference between restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses.

- **EX 1:** My brother Travis lives in Colorado. **vs.** My brother, Travis, lives in Colorado.
- **EX 2:** The suspect in the lineup who has red hair committed the crime.
- **EX 3:** The red-haired suspect, who owns a classic car, committed the crime.
- **EX 4:** The novelist Jane Austen is known for sophisticated narrative technique.
- **EX 5:** The greatest novelist of the late eighteenth century, Jane Austen, is known for sophisticated narrative technique.

Be wary of overusing dashes and semicolons.

EX: Freud's final conclusion is unconvincing; his focus remains entirely on the role of the Id.

Know what colons can and can't do.

WRONG: Your dedicated whittler requires: a knife, a piece of wood, and a back porch.

RIGHT: Your dedicated whittler requires three props: a knife, a piece of wood, and a back porch.

ALSO RIGHT: Many of the ice slides built in Russia were quite elaborate: some rose to eighty feet and accommodated several large sleds at once.

Separate clauses must be divided with punctuation.

There are five ways to punctuate two complete thoughts:

- 1. Let the two clauses stand on their own, separated by a period:
 - **EX:** All happy families resemble each other. Each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.
- 2. Link the two clauses with a semicolon instead of a period:
 - **EX:** All happy families resemble each other; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

3. Use a conjunction and a comma between the two:

EX: All happy families resemble each other, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

4. Subordinate one clause to another:

EX: Although all happy families resemble each other, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

5. Separate the two clauses with an adverb:

EX: All happy families resemble each other; however, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

SOURCES

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