

AVOIDING AWKWARD: CHRONIC PROBLEMS TO LOOK FOR

Subject-predicate drift. One common problem is to let the “actors” of your sentence get separated from the “actions” they perform.

EX 1 Phillis Wheatley, whose book *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral* was the first book of poetry published by an African-American, lived in Boston.

Here the phrase that describes Wheatley interrupts the subject of the sentence – Wheatley herself – and the predicate phrase – “lived in Boston.”

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

EX 1 After going through the centrifuge, the beef mixture is then treated with an anti-bacterial agent, because grinding up meat makes it more susceptible to contamination with dangerous stuff like E. Coli. (Novak, “In Defense of Pink Slime.”)

Here the author is trying to convince readers that ‘pink slime,’ a meat slurry mixture, is not a terrible thing. The passive voice here – “the beef ... is treated” allows him to avoid saying who or what does the “treating.”

EX 2: Manning Sentenced to 35 Years for a Pivotal Leak of U.S. Files. (*The New York Times*, 21 August 2013)

If this headline were written in active voice, the subject would be the jury who convicted Manning. However, since Manning is the focus of the story, passive voice is appropriate.

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; it’s not the fifties anymore, but things change slowly.

Here there are a few problems. The first sentence would be okay if the writer went on to specify what the approaches are and why they are unsatisfactory. However, what is the “it” in the second sentence? Crimea? America’s relationship to Crimea? And why does it matter that it’s not the fifties anymore? Is this a Cold War reference? Perhaps if “things” were more specific – “America’s attitude toward Russia” – or “America’s willingness to intervene in foreign conflicts” – the sentence would be clearer.

EX 2: This paper is an analysis of the problem, and gives a solution.

Ideally, each sentence in your paper could only work in your paper. This sentence could be slipped into any proposal.

EX 3: There are various reasons why voter fraud is a problem.

Again, this sentence tells us very little.

EX 4: In *The Great Gatsby*, Daisy cries over Gatsby's shirts. This shows her materialism and foreshadows the novel's conclusion.

How?

Noun gluttony. This can be a particular problem in professional writing.

EX 1 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.

This example, quoted in Bill Templer's "Pedagogies for Plainer Talk," was originally part of OSHA regulations (12). Mercifully, it was revised to read, "An exit door must be free from signs or decorations that obscure its visibility."

EX 2 [The] Forest Service continually analyzes current and predicted weather conditions, wildfire occurrence, and the presence and availability of vegetative fuels throughout the year to maintain a continual assessment of wildfire risk at the state, regional and local level. Utilizing this information, agency staff develop daily and seasonal forecasts to assist the state and local government entities in preparing for and responding to periods of elevated fire danger or fire seasons. (from "Texas A&M Forest Service")

Although this is certainly easier to read than the last example, there is still a chance that the lists of nouns here will become confusing or overwhelming for the reader. We might revise is paragraph into something like: "To assess wildfire risk, the Forest service continually analyzes weather conditions, wildfire occurrence, and the availability of vegetative fuels. Staff develop daily and seasonal forecasts that help state and local governments to prepare for, and respond to, fire seasons or periods of elevated fire danger. How would you rephrase this sentence?"

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

EX 1: The beauty of the painting may be seen in the complexity of the brushstrokes, in the management of the light, and in the depth of the scene, artistry for which Renoir was famous during his lifetime and for which he remains famous today.

There are ten prepositions in this sentence, and they result in a repetitive series of phrases. We might rework this into something more like: “The complexity of the brushstrokes, management of the light, and depth of the scene all speak to the painting’s beauty and Renoir’s talents. These abilities account for Renoir’s fame, which began in his own lifetime and continues today.

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

EX 1: I ate almost all the cookies. **vs.** I almost ate all the cookies.

These sentences mean two different things.

EX 2: Only he told me that he wished me the best.

He only told me that he wished me the best.

He told only me that he wished me the best.

He told me only that he wished me the best.

He told me that he only wished me the best.

He told me that he wished only me the best.

Again, each of these sentences mean very different things.

Dangling participles. These can confuse your readers. Make sure that descriptive phrases are next to the word they modify.

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.

This example is reprinted in Constance Hale’s Sin and Syntax. Hale follows it by asking, “When was the last time you were thinly sliced and heaped on rye?” (200).

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.

This is another example Hale includes, from Our Town (200).

EX 3: Being a Religion major, Hinduism has always been fascinating.

Of course, this is one much closer to the kinds of errors common to college papers. But since Hinduism isn’t a Religion major, the sentence needs correcting.

Incorrect parallelisms. If you have a list, then each part of the list needs to have a similar construction – don't mix verbs with nouns.

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

This sentence could either be revised to say: "Following a new exercise program and going on a strict diet will make me healthier," or "This new exercise program and 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.

Dawn Lewis uses this sentence from Smithsonian Magazine to show her students that problems with parallelism can get professional writers, too.

Needlessly watered-down arguments. Modifiers like "might," "may," "could," and modifying phrases like "I believe," or "It is likely that" can make your reader less likely to trust you.

EX 1: In my opinion, we may need to rethink our policy toward Iran.

You almost never need to include the phrase "in my opinion," since readers know that you're the one writing. Here, the word "may" also dilutes the argument.

EX 2: The author doesn't seem to take Ramazani's argument into account.

While this is fine for prewriting, by the time you're drafting a paper, phrases like "doesn't seem to" make your reader wonder why you don't know whether something's happening or not.

Unnecessary adverbs.

EX 1: She frantically hurried out of the door.

What does "frantically" add to this sentence?

EX 2: He voluntarily offered to go.

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: Modifiers like “might,” “may,” “could,” and modifying phrases like “I believe,” or “It is likely that,” can make your reader less likely to trust you.

Here the comma after “It is likely that” is incorrect because it separates a subject and a verb.

EX 2: Langston Hughes is famous for writing, many poems including “The Weary Blues,” “Harlem,” and “Mother to Son.”

Here the comma after “writing” is incorrect because it separates the verb (writing) from the object (many poems).

EX 3: The only thing she wanted was, to be left in peace after her busy day.

Again, here the comma separates a verb and its object.

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

EX: All Southwestern students, including first years, are welcome in the DEWC.

Know the difference between restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses. You don’t need to know the names, but it’s helpful to know the difference between these two types of descriptive phrases. A restrictive clause is part of the subject. A nonrestrictive clause describes the subject. Essentially, if you can remove a phrase from a sentence and still have the sentence make sense, it is probably a nonrestrictive clause and should be set off with commas.

EX 1: My brother Travis lives in Colorado. **vs.** My brother, Travis, lives in Colorado.

In the first sentence, “Travis” is restrictive clause. The speaker may have several brothers, but it is “My brother Travis” who lives in Colorado. Travis becomes part of the subject. In the second sentence, “Travis” is a nonrestrictive clause. The speaker only has one brother, so he doesn’t need to explain which one. The subject, then, is “my brother,” who “lives in Colorado.”

EX 2: That woman in the red shirt can give you the directions you need. **vs.** That woman, in the red shirt, can give you directions you need.

In the first sentence, there may be many women around; you need to find the one in the red shirt. In the second sentence, there’s only one woman. Her shirt color is incidental.

EX 3: The novelist Jane Austen is known for sophisticated narrative technique. **vs** The greatest novelist of the late eighteenth century, Jane Austen, is known for sophisticated narrative technique.

Be wary of overusing dashes and semicolons. They're great for joining two ideas, but the connection between those ideas needs to be clear to your reader.

EX: Freud's final conclusion is unconvincing; his language is difficult to understand.

These are two separate ideas, and therefore the connection between them needs to be made explicit.

Know what colons can and can't do. A good test to see if you're using colons correctly is to read your sentence and replace the colon with the phrases "they are" or "for example"

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

In this example from The Elements of Style, if we replace the colon with "that is," we get a nonsensical sentence (15). "Your dedicated whittler requires, they are a knife, a piece of wood, and a back porch. Replacing it with "for example" makes little more sense: "Your dedicated whittler requires for example, 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.

"Your dedicated whittler requires three props. They are a knife, a piece of wood, and a back porch." Much better.

ALSO RIGHT: The costumes for *Game of Thrones* are stunning in their intricacy: one dress includes hand-sewn, organza beetles with movable wings.

Here the phrase "that is" works as a substitute: The costumes for Game of Thrones are stunning in their intricacy. For example, one dress includes hand-sewn, organza beetles with movable wings.

Separate clauses must be divided with punctuation. There are five ways to join separate clauses, but you can't just put two complete subject/predicate phrases into one sentence. In *Sin and Syntax*, Constance Hale uses a famous sentence from Tolstoy to explain your options (209). You can:

1. Separate clauses with a period.

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

This works well if you don't need readers to make a strong connection between the two clauses.

2. Use a semicolon to join related clauses.

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

This is a good way to join clauses that are related, but where you don't need to spell out the terms of the relationship.

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.

Here the conjunction explains the relationship between the two clauses and make a stronger connection between the two than a semicolon would.

4. Subordinate one clause to another:

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

Here we understand that our focus should be on the unhappy families.

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.

According to Hale, this construction "emphasizes the paradox." This is similar to the conjunction & comma route, but the semicolon encourages us to pause between the clauses, reminding us that they are related but different enough to require a break between them.

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