

SENTENCE REVISION

by Sharon Williams and Wendy Sharer '92

How do you revise sentence errors? The following examples of problematic sentences and suggested revisions and advice on correcting sentence errors should help you in the revision process. If you have questions about these or any other writing problems, consult a writing handbook or talk with your professor or a writing tutor.

Wordiness

Here are examples of wordy sentences and possible revisions. Notice that the revised sentences are clearer and more concise. **Hint:** eliminating forms of the verb *to be* often resolves wordiness.

1. The Stanton house as it exists now in the present day still shows evidence of the attempt of Cady Stanton to simplify her household duties.
Revision: The Stanton house still shows evidence of Cady Stanton's attempt to simplify her household duties.
2. *Tom Jones* is a novel that comically portrays English society in the middle Eighteenth Century.
Revision: The novel *Tom Jones* comically portrays English society in the middle Eighteenth Century. (note dropping of the verb *to be*)
3. If economists were to base their statements about economic growth entirely on the information given by the GNP, they would have false findings.
Revision: Economists would have false findings if they based their statements entirely on the GNP.
4. Hamlet is obviously distressed; his vehemence in speaking shows this.
Revision: The vehemence of Hamlet's speech shows his distress.

Fragments

A sentence fragment occurs when a writer presents a portion of a sentence as if it were a complete sentence. The fragments in the following examples are italicized.

1. Hamlet sees his father's ghost frequently. *Which almost makes him insane.*
Revision: Hamlet's frequent sightings of his father's ghost almost make him insane.
2. Thousands of young people gathered in protests. *Or helped distribute pamphlets to distant areas.*
Revision: Thousands of young people gathered in protests or helped distribute pamphlets to distant areas.
3. There may be errors in measurement. *A possibility that results from faulty equipment.*
Revision: As a result of faulty equipment, there may be errors in measurement.

Passive Voice

The passive voice is often misleading and wordy. When a writer uses passive voice verbs, the reader is unable to determine who or what is the source of the action. Using active voice makes a sentence clearer and livelier, because the sentence states the source of the action. In the examples below, the passive constructions in the original sentences are italicized. Note that the active voice verbs cuts down on wordiness.

1. The process of modernization in any society *is seen* as a positive change.
Revision: Most people see the modernization of a society as a positive change.
2. In the poems, *it is suggested* that the narrator *has been discouraged* by his pursuit of love.
Revision: The narrator suggests that the pursuit of love has discouraged him.
3. Jefferson's thoughts that displayed his new support for the Constitution *were documented* in one very unique letter to his friend James Madison.
Revision: Jefferson documented his new support of the Constitution in a unique letter to his friend, James Madison.

Subject-Verb Agreement

Placing subjects close to their verbs reduces subject-verb agreement errors. If the subject of a sentence is singular, the verb must be singular; if the subject is plural, the verb must be plural. Subjects and verbs are italicized in the following sentences.

1. *Each* of the female characters, as well as the male characters they interact with, *seem* to have difficulty with the transition from traditional to modern values.

- Revision:** *Each* of the female characters, as well as the male characters they interact with, *seems* to have difficulty with the transition from traditional to modern values.
2. There *is* three *reasons* for the government's reaction.
Revision: There *are* three *reasons* for the government's reaction.
3. The poetic *devices and constructs* that help to reinforce the effects of the imagery *is* the final topic of discussion.
Revision: The *poetic devices and constructs* that help to reinforce the effects of the imagery *are* the final topic of discussion.

Unclear Pronoun Reference

Always make clear to whom or to what pronouns refer. In addition, be sure that pronouns and their antecedents agree in number and gender. The unclear pronouns are italicized in the following examples.

1. To keep the birds from eating seeds, soak *them* in blue food coloring.
Revision: Soak the seeds in blue food coloring to keep the birds from eating them.¹
2. Writers should spend a great deal of time thinking about their arguments to make sure *they* are not superficial.
Revision: Writers should spend a great deal of time thinking about their arguments to make sure that those arguments are not superficial.
3. Our lab group originally determined dominance on the basis of *its* fins.
Revision: Our lab group originally determined the fish's dominance on the basis of its fins.

Dangling or Misplaced Modifiers

Dangling or misplaced modifiers refer to the wrong word in the sentence. To revise such constructions, use the word to which the modifier refers as a subject of the main clause (example 1), or move the modifier closer to the word it modifies (examples 2 and 3). The problem modifiers in the following sentences are italicized.

1. *After reading the original study*, the article remains unconvincing.
(The article did not read the study; a person did.)
Revision: After reading the original study, I remain unconvinced.

¹ H. Ramsey Fowler and Jane E. Aaron. *The Little Brown Handbook*, (Boston: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1989), p. 283.

2. Of major importance to the creation of the legend of Custer was the public battle in which he was engaged for several months preceding his death *with President Grant*.

Revision: Important to the creation of the Custer legend was the public battle between President Grant and Custer in the months preceding Custer's death.

3. But Levi could not survive the burden of life after the Holocaust, and in 1987, he committed suicide, *a successful author and a scientist*.

Revision: Although Levi was a successful author and scientist, he could not survive the burden of life after the Holocaust and committed suicide in 1987.

Subordination

Subordination allows a writer to combine ideas to demonstrate the relationship of one idea to another. When using subordination, place the key idea of the sentence in the independent clause and the less important idea in the subordinate clause. Notice how the construction of complex sentences with subordination can eliminate short, choppy sentences. The subordinate clauses are italicized in the revisions.

1. The novel is very powerful. It concerns the rights of women in the twentieth century.

Revision: The novel, *which concerns the rights of women in the twentieth century*, is very powerful.

2. The writer comes up with many ideas about his or her topic. He or she organizes these ideas into a paper.

Revision: *After coming up with many ideas about the topic*, the writer organizes them into a paper.

3. The changes in education included a change in curriculum. The changes had a drastic effect on the thinking of the Turkish villagers.

Revision: The changes in education, *which included a change in curriculum*, had a drastic effect on the thinking of the Turkish villagers.

Parallel Structure

Parallel elements share the same grammatical form. The use of parallel structure creates a symmetrical, graceful construction that is pleasing to the reader. The parallel structures are italicized in the following revisions.

1. Three reasons why steel companies keep losing money are that their plants are inefficient, high labor costs, and foreign competition is increasing.

Revision: Three reasons why steel companies keep losing money are *inefficient plants, high labor costs, and increasing foreign competition*.

2. When attempting to explain the origins of World War I, historians are divided into three schools: the inevitable conflict school, the domestic dysfunction school, and the school of thought which attributes blame to a particular country or alliance.

Revision: Attempting to explain the origins of World War I, historians are divided into three schools: *the school of inevitable conflict, the school of domestic dysfunction, and the school of specific blame.*

3. In order to understand the source of anti-Communist activity against unions, one needs to trace the origins of the Cold War and how international events led to attempts to eradicate Communism at home.

Revision: To understand the source of anti-Communist activity against unions, one needs to trace *the origins of the Cold War and the effects of international events on anti-Communism at home.*

Comma, Semicolon, and Colon Usage Errors

Students frequently misuse commas, semicolons, and colons. A thorough discussion of these and other errors can be found in any handbook of writing, including the Writing Center handout "Punctuation Patterns," the *Hamilton College Style Sheet*, and many other handbooks available on-line and at the Writing Center. If you are uncertain about when to use these marks of punctuation--or any other aspect of sentence construction--check with your professor or a writing tutor.

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Works Cited:

Fowler, H. Ramsay and Jane E. Aaron. *The Little, Brown Handbook*. Boston: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1989.