

COMMON SENTENCE ERRORS

Poorly constructed sentences will affect how well your reader understands your ideas. As you polish your writing, pay attention to sentence problems, including errors of agreement, pronoun reference, voice, wordiness/vagueness, misplaced elements, and structure.

Agreement Errors “agr”

Subject-verb agreement error

A subject must agree in number with the verb.

- singular subject/singular verb; plural subject/plural verb
- Note that subject-verb agreement errors often occur when the subject and verb are separated in the sentence.
- Also note that indefinite pronouns take singular verbs.
- common indefinite pronouns: *anybody, anyone, each, either, everyone, everything, neither, nobody*

Practice

“*Repetition and parallelism*, like metaphors, *presents* itself not only in the text but in the aesthetics of the poem.”

“The *rhythm* of the children’s movements, created by hard beats and alliteration, *give* this memory a nursery rhyme quality.”

“*Each* of the plates *contain* bacterial growth.”

Noun-Pronoun Agreement Error

A pronoun must agree in number and gender with its noun antecedent.

- It is often better to use a plural noun and pronoun rather than singular.
- Another solution is to eliminate the pronoun altogether.
 - *Each* student must meet with *their* advisor. (agr. error)
 - *Each* student must meet with *his or her* advisor. (correct but clumsy)
 - *All students* must meet with *their* advisors. (correct)
 - *All students* must meet with advisors. (correct)

Practice

“The audience understands that, if *a vampire* is truly put to rest, *their victims* become healed.”

“If *one* accepts Kant’s moral imperative, *their* personal actions must change.”

“In the original *state constitution*, *they* allowed polygamy.”

Unclear Pronoun Reference “p.ref.”

A pronoun must clearly refer to a specific, prior noun (usually the nearest prior noun)

“Writers should think about their arguments to make sure *they* are not superficial.”

Who is superficial? the arguments? the writers?

Practice

“A key difference between banking crises of today and of yesterday is that *they* have greater global impact.”

Who has greater global impact? today’s crises or yesterday’s?

“In his life and writings, Thoreau was opposed to *this*.”

This what?

Passive Voice/Active Voice “pv” or “act”

- Verbs have two voices: active voice and passive voice.
 - active voice: Tim *walked* the dog.
 - passive voice: The dog *was walked* by Tim.
- The passive voice of the verb is formed by combining a form of *to be* (is, are, was were) with a past participle (verb plus “-ed”), e.g., “was walked.”
- Passive constructions create wordier and less precise sentences.

Use the active voice when it is important to know who or what did the action.

“On April 19, 1775, arms *were seized* at Concord, Massachusetts, precipitating the American Revolution.”
(passive voice)

Is it important to know which group seized the arms? If yes, then use active voice to identify who did the seizing:
“On April 19, 1775, British troops *seized* arms at Concord, Massachusetts, precipitating the American Revolution.” (active voice)

Sometimes the passive voice is the better choice, when emphasis on the doer of the action is not needed.

“All of the specimens were collected in Kirkland Glen.”

Practice

“In the poem, *it is suggested* that love is fleeting.”

“Yeager’s bold reinterpretation of the text *is clearly illustrated* by comparing the original to the revision.”

“Descartes observes that everything he clearly perceives is true. This concept *is then used* as the ultimate criterion for determining what is true or false.”

Wordiness, Vagueness “w” “v”

Symptoms of wordiness:

- Use of *to be* rather than a strong action verb: ‘*there is*’
- Use of a vague subject pronoun: ‘*there is,*’ ‘*this is,*’ ‘*it is,*’ ...
- Lack of concision: repetition, unnecessary words, sentence strings

Revision strategies for wordiness and vagueness:

Make the true subject the grammatical subject, the true verb the grammatical verb:

“Usner’s work *is an attempt at revision* of orthodox historiography.”
(Usner attempts...)

“According to Dawkins, when genes work seamlessly together, it creates a false sense of consciousness.”
(According to Dawkins, genes working seamlessly together creates....)

Replace a form of the *to be* verb with an active verb:

“There are many examples in Li’s argument of the negative effects of popular media.”
(Li’s argument exemplifies the negative effects of popular media.)

Eliminate vagueness, wordiness:

“It is certain that we are currently living in a way that will surely instigate a collapse of society and maybe even our entire species if we do not change our ways.”
(If we do not change our current way of living, our society and perhaps our entire species may collapse.)

Combine closely related clauses or sentences:

“The refuge is 19 million acres of pristine wilderness. The refuge is ecologically significant because it is the breeding ground for many migratory species.”

(The refuge, 19 million acres of pristine wilderness, is an ecologically significant breeding ground for many migratory species.)

Combine a string of simple, declarative sentences:

“The first effect was seen when a sugar refinery opened in Susurluk. The opening of the factory created a new middle class of wage laborers in the city. This was seen as a positive change in the community.”

(The first effect of a sugar refinery opening in Susurluk was the creation of a new middle class of wage laborers: a positive change in the community.)

Combine related ideas. Place the main idea in an independent clause and the secondary idea in a subordinate clause or phrase:

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

(The changes in education, including changes in curriculum, had)

Misplaced Elements & Dangling Modifiers “mp” “da”

Misplaced words or phrases create confusion by referring to the wrong or even to no word in a sentence. These errors often accompany passive voice.

To avoid confusing the reader, keep related ideas together—this advice is especially important in longer sentences.

Misplaced Element

modifies/refers to the wrong word

A fine athlete and student, the coach honored the team captain.

The coach was a fine...?

Dangling Modifier

refers to no word in the sentence

Walking back from town, my wallet was lost.

My wallet walks?

Practice

“Congress’s attempt to attach pork to the legislation, viewed as self-serving, failed on voice vote.”

What was self-serving? The legislation? The effort?

“After reading the original study, the flaws in Bett’s argument are obvious.”

The flaws read the study?

Lack of Parallel Structure

Parallel elements should share the same grammatical form.

Practice

“Three reasons why steel companies are unprofitable are that their plants are inefficient, high labor costs, and foreign competition is increasing.”

“Military intervention should be applied to instances of genocide (Rwanda), ethnic cleansing (Bosnia), and when economic tools have failed (Iraq).”

“The conflict over abortion has long focused on the state of the fetus and when life starts.”