

Common Stylistic Problems

Adapted from John M. Crosset's *A Breviary of English Usage*

[agr] agreement

Pronouns must agree with their antecedents in number, gender, and person.

Wrong Example: I asked everyone whether they knew anyone who wanted to sell their boat. ("They" and "their," which are plural, refer to "everyone" and "anyone," which are singular.)

Pronouns should have definite antecedents.

Wrong Example: An advertisement for a television series reads, "Perhaps not every show will be distinguished. But that's what we'll be trying for." The ambiguous antecedent of "that's" allowed the New Yorker to comment, "ever thought of raising your sights?"

Wrong Example: In Sophocles's play Oedipus Rex, he deals with the problem of foreknowledge and free will. (The word "Sophocles's" is not a noun but a case and hence, having an adjectival function, cannot be the antecedent of "he".)

Students often use a relative pronoun to refer not to a specific antecedent but to a whole previous idea.

Wrong Example: God would, in his anger, destroy all of mankind, which would be destroying his creation. (The reader expects "which" to refer to "creation", or even to "anger"; instead, it refers to the entire previous clause. To correct such sentences, minimally, insert a phrase like "an act" before the "which".)

[cc] confusion of categories

Wrong Example: Eventually I hope to become a doctor, a type of work which demands long training. (An incongruous apposition: a doctor is not a type of work.)

Wrong Example: An example of laziness is when a student does not bother to re-write an awkward sentence. (An incongruous predication: an example is not a "when.") Note that clumsy and circumlocutory phrases such as "revolves around", "pertains to", "deals with" are no real improvement.

Wrong Example: The reason that both Napoleon and Hitler lost their wars in Russia is because they failed to allow for the severity of the Russian winter. (The words "reason" and "because" mean the same thing: a reason is not a "because". You may change the "because" to "that", or--even better--omit the phrase "The reason that" and retain the "because".)

[cu] comparing unlike objects

Items in a comparison should be from the same category.

Wrong Example: Unlike the stories of Jacob and Joseph, it is hard to tell from reading Exodus what kind of man Moses was. (What is "unlike the stories of Jacob and Joseph"--"it"?)

Wrong Example: The living standard in Canada is second only to the United States. (Correct by changing to "to that of the United States"; it is living standards that the writer wishes to compare, and not a living standard with a country.)

[d] diction

Use precise and accurate terms.

A. Colorless language such as "it is interesting to observe" or "it was a very nice building" is useless. If you are going to ask someone to read what you have written, tell him something specific; do not retreat to the use of terms such as "kind of" or "sort of". Most slang terms (e.g., "cool", "awesome", etc.) fail precisely because they state only that the speaker likes something but fail to state what it is that he likes and why. Expository writing consists not of admiration and transport but of distinction and analysis.

[da] dangling element or misplaced modifier

dangling elements: These are phrases and clauses which, by modifying grotesquely incongruous parts of the sentence, produce absurd meaning.

Wrong Example: When in doubt about the right answer, your professor can be consulted. (As the sentence stands, it says that the professor is in doubt. To correct, change the main clause to "you can consult your professor"; in this way the sentence will have a proper subject for "When in doubt" to modify. Notice also that you will have rid the sentence of an ugly passive voice.)

Other Wrong Examples:

1. When six years old, my father took me on a trip to the Grand Canyon. (Note: the father was not six.)
2. After two years in the army, home looked good to me. (Note: "home" did not spend two years in the army.)
3. Taking one consideration with another, the lot of a policeman is not a happy one. (Who is doing the "taking"? Not the policeman's lot.)
4. With the exception of the farmer, everything we eat has been processed by machines. (No comment.)
5. When finally completed, I figured that I had spent six hours on the assignment. ("I" was not completed.)

6. In giving money to the poor, it is necessary to leave some for yourself. (Who is doing the "giving"? Not it.)

misplaced modifiers: These are closely allied to dangling elements. In general, place modifiers as close as you can to the words or phrases modified.

Wrong Examples:

1. "As a woman, he wanted ... her, but only when the job had been done." (The author of this sentence, Ian Fleming, presumably did not intend to imply that James Bond was a woman.)

2. "I've looked everywhere in this area for an instruction book on how to play the concertina without success." (The New Yorker's comment was: "You need no instruction. Just plunge ahead boldly.")

[ic] incomplete comparisons

Wrong Example: People magazine is designed to appeal to a wider audience. ("Wider" than what?)

[id] unidiomatic speech or expression

This sign indicates that what you have written, although probably not grammatically incorrect, nevertheless does not read like something that a native speaker of English would write. The best way to correct the problem is to read the sentence to a literate friend and ask for advice on how to fix it.

[ish] illogical shifts

Do not make shifts in person, number, or tense without a good reason.

Illogical shifts in *person*:

Wrong Example: It is still more difficult, I feel, once one has made a decision, to stick to your decision in a society like ours. (If one begins with a "one", one should continue with the same construction; one should not shift to "he" or other pronouns. If the use becomes clumsy, re-write, using "a man" or "we" or "you" consistently throughout.)

Illogical shifts in *number*:

Wrong Example: One may say that Clarence Darrow and Adolf Hitler were strange bedfellows, and I agree with them. (Does the writer intend to say that he agrees with Darrow and Hitler?)

Wrong Example: Each caste is assuming infallibility by taking their way of life as the best. ("Caste" is a collective noun; pronouns referring to collective nouns, in American English, are singular, and hence "their" should be "its".)

Illogical shifts in *tense*:

Wrong Example: The United States and Canada have in the past and are still working together closely. (The word "working" cannot go with "have".)

Wrong Example: Bacon thinks that Aristotelianism is wrong; he argued as follows. (Switch from present to past with no good reason.)

[mm] mixed metaphors

Do not mix incongruous ideas in a metaphor.

Wrong Example: Throughout the ages men have awakened from the toboggan ride of power politics only to find themselves in the desert of solitude. (If you think this example, taken from a student, too obvious, observe how the vice infects even sophisticated writers, as in this sentence from S.N. Behrman: "In the dissolving planes of social and economic revolution, would not these racial atavisms be dissipated in the astringent ozone of a New Order, filtered through panaceas?")

[p] punctuation

You have misused or left out a comma, semicolon, colon, period, or question mark. Consult the Writing Center's punctuation guide.

[pa] passive voice

Do not use the passive voice unless there is a good reason to do so.

Wrong Examples:

A. It was reported today in Washington that... (in news from Washington, the source is usually more important than the statement; omission of the agent lends the sentence a spurious authority).

B. More advanced cultural aspects were also exchanged as a result of trading (by starting the sentence with the abstract noun "aspects", the writer forced himself into using the passive voice "were exchanged". Although context may provide agents, the sentence by itself is unclear; furthermore, can "aspects" really be exchanged?)

[pl] parallelism

Parts of the sentence that are parallel in thought should be parallel in form.

Wrong Examples:

A. Here was a man who, by virtue of his diligence and high moral standards, stood out as an individual and meticulous accountant. (Note that the sentence is also ambiguous; is "individual" a noun or an adjective? Repeat "as a" before "meticulous" to make the parallelism clear.)

B. To attempt a definition of greatness in literature is as difficult as attempting to define beauty. (Why shift from "to attempt" to "attempting"? If desirable to avoid the cacophony of two infinitives, change the first "to attempt" to a parallel "attempting".)

C. Some people believe that money is a garden of Eden; other people seclude themselves on a desert island. (Construction should be parallel; why shift from "believe that" to "seclude themselves"?)

D. Each citizen was one of million who wore the same clothes, ate the same food, did the same things, and looked like his brother. (When you start an obviously parallel series, do not break it, as this sentence does in the last clause.)

Beware of cancerous polysyllables: what does "analyzation" do which "analysis" does not do? Why use "medication" when you mean "medicine"?

[pr] primer style

Sometimes to avoid the difficulties of correct subordination, students take to writing an excessive number of simple sentences, a style often monotonous in construction, always reminiscent of a child's reader.

Wrong Example: Oedipus is a proud man. Oedipus slew his father in a dispute about a right of way. He thinks he can solve all problems. Oedipus is contemptuous of Teiresias.

[r] vague or ambiguous reference

Make sure that pronouns such as "this," "they," and "it" refer to some definite and easily identifiable person, thing, event, or concept.

Wrong example: In the above passage, Jocasta uses words meaning "blind" to emphasize that Tiresias is unreliable. I choose to discuss them in this paper to demonstrate their importance in the play, thus making it relative to my argument which is its usage in Sophocles' plays.

Do "them" and "their" refer to words meaning "blind" or to Jocasta and Tiresias? What do "it" and "its" refer to?

[w] wordiness

Avoid needless words. For example, it is not necessary to say, "There are many people in the world today who believe..." It is enough to say, "Many people today believe..." No rule can be formulated here; experience in re-writing will teach you best.

[ww] wrong word

Watch out of homonyms.

Students often confuse *there / their / they're*; *it's / its*; *affect / effect*; *allusion / illusion*; *to / two / too*, and many others. Your spell-check won't save you from these.

Make sure that you know the precise meaning of all the words you use. See if you can find the errors in these examples taken from students' papers, which I culled from various websites:

"The summarians, a pre-semantic population, occupied this ancient area of land."

"The Sun is one of the clearest stars to be seen on earth because it has the largest animosity."

"Islamic clerks met today in Iran."

"One myth says that the mother of Achilles dipped him in the River Stynx until he became intolerable."

[x] sloppy error

Typographical or other minor error.