

# *Sentence Clarity*

On-Campus Writing Lab

This presentation will cover :

## ***Common Sentence Clarity Concerns***

- 1 Sentence Clarity
- 2 Misplaced Modifiers
- 3 Dangling Modifiers
- 4 Parallel Structures
- 5 Passive Voice

# *Sentence Clarity*

## Why care about making sentences clear?

- **To communicate effectively with the reader.**
  - Clear sentences help ensure your message is understood as intended.
- **To make writing interesting and appealing.**
  - Readers are more likely to stay engaged when the writing is smooth and easy to follow.
- **To show credibility and authority as a writer.**
  - Clear, well-structured sentences reflect thoughtful and competent writing.
- **To be persuasive.**
  - Logical and well-articulated ideas are more convincing and impactful.

# *Misplaced Modifiers*

## Modifier:

- Can be a **word or group of words** (phrase).
- A modifier **describes, clarifies, or gives more detail** about other words in a sentence.



## Misplaced modifier:

- A **modifier in the wrong place** in a sentence.
- Makes sentences **awkward, confusing, or (unintentionally) humorous**.

# Misplaced Modifiers

Do these sentences have different meanings? Why?

The dog **under the tree** bit Carrie.

The dog bit Carrie **under the tree**.

Who bit whom, and where?

The **dog under the tree** bit Carrie.

- The **dog that was under the tree** is the one who bit Carrie.
- “*Under the tree*” describes **which dog**.

The dog bit Carrie **under the tree**.

- This means **the biting happened under the tree**.
- “*Under the tree*” describes **where the biting took place**.

# *Modifiers Used for Comedic Effect*

Sometimes modifiers are intentionally used for comedic effect.



"The other day I shot an  
elephant in my pajamas. How  
he got in my pajamas I'll never  
know."

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Groucho Marx

# *Misplaced Modifiers*

How can you correct this sentence?

Buffy called her adorable kitten opening the can of food and filled the bowl.

Process of guiding questions:

1. What is the modifier?
2. What word does it describe, clarify, or give more detail about?
3. Is the modifier placed next to that word?
4. Where should the modifier be placed for clarity?
5. Does the sentence create an unintended or funny meaning?
6. Can the sentence be misread in more than one way?
7. Is the modifier interrupting the sentence awkwardly?

# Misplaced Modifiers

## Misplaced modifier:

Buffy called her adorable kitten opening the can of food and filled the bowl.

(The sentence sounds like *the kitten is opening the can*, which is confusing.)

## Correctly placed modifier:

Opening the can of food, Buffy called her adorable kitten and filled the bowl.

(The phrase “*Opening the can of food*” clearly refers to **Buffy**, not the kitten.)

## Revision:

Place the modifier *next to the word it modifies* to avoid confusion.

# *One-Word Modifiers*

One-word modifiers can easily be misplaced.

These include:

| Quantity or Degree | Limiting | Frequency | Time  | Place  |
|--------------------|----------|-----------|-------|--------|
| Almost             | Even     | Always    | Later | Above  |
| Hardly             | Just     | Never     | Now   | Below  |
| Nearly             | Merely   | Often     | Soon  | Here   |
| Scarcely           | Only     | Sometimes | Then  | Nearby |
| Very               |          | Rarely    | Today | There  |

# *Misplaced Modifiers Review*

## Misplaced modifier:

- A **misplaced modifier** is a word, phrase, or clause that is **in the wrong place** in a sentence, making the meaning **unclear or incorrect**.

### Incorrect:

The dog under the tree bit Carrie.

*(Was Carrie under the tree? Or the dog?)*

## Correct placement of modifiers:

- Modifiers go next to the word or phrase they modify.
- One-word modifiers go before the word or phrase they modify.

### Correct:

The dog bit Carrie under the tree.

*(Now it's clear where Carrie was bitten.)*

# *Dangling Modifiers*

## Dangling modifiers

- Do not sensibly modify anything in their sentence.
- Modifier is present, but it has nothing to modify.
- Often occur at the beginning or end of a sentence.
- Often indicated by an “-ing” verb or a “to +” verb phrase.

### Dangling modifier:

*Walking to the library, the rain started pouring.*

*(Who was walking? The sentence doesn't say—so the modifier dangles.)*

### Revised for clarity:

*While I was walking to the library, the rain started pouring.*

*(Now it's clear who was walking.)*

# *Dangling Modifiers*

What is the modifier modifying?

Having finished dinner, the rugby match was turned on.

Remember, modifiers go next to the words or phrases they modify.

The next slide will demonstrate ways to correct the dangling modifier.



# *Three Ways to Fix Dangling Modifiers*

1. Name the appropriate doer of the action as the subject of the main clause.
  - Having finished dinner, **Jude** turned on the rugby match.
2. Place the subject of the action within the dangling modifier.
  - After **Jude** finished dinner, **he** turned on the rugby match.
3. Combine the phrase and clause.
  - **Jude** turned on the rugby match after finishing dinner.

# *Dangling Modifier Example and Identification Strategy*

How might you correct the following sentence?

Playing solitaire on his computer for three hours, Michael's paper was not finished.

Process of guiding questions:

1. What is the modifier?
2. What does it describe, clarify, or give more detail about?
3. Do you need to insert a doer?
4. Where should the modifier be placed?

# *Dangling Modifier Examples and Revision*

How might you correct the following sentence?

Playing solitaire on his computer for three hours, Michael's paper was not finished.

## Possible revisions

1. Playing solitaire on the computer for three hours, **Michael** did not complete his paper.
2. Because **Michael** played solitaire on the computer for three hours, **he** did not complete his paper.
3. **Michael** did not complete his paper because **he** played solitaire on the computer for three hours.

# *Dangling Modifier Review*

## Dangling modifiers:

- Often occur at the beginning or end of a sentence
- Often indicated by an “-ing” verb or a “to + verb” phrase



## How to correct dangling modifiers:

- Name the appropriate or logical doer of the action as the subject of the main clause.
- Place the subject of the action within the dangling modifier.
- Combine the phrase and clause.

# *Parallel Structure*

## Parallel Structure:

- Using the same pattern of words to show that 2 or more ideas are equally important
- Applying the same grammatical pattern to words, phrases, or clauses
- Using coordinating conjunctions ("**and**" and "**or**") to join parallel structures.



**"that government of the  
people, by the people, for the  
people, shall not perish from  
the earth."**

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Abraham Lincoln

# *Common Types of Parallel Structure*

## 1. Parallel with the -ing form (gerund) of verbs:

- Mary likes hiking, swimming, and bicycling.

## 2. Parallel with infinitive verb phrases:

- Mary likes to hike, to swim, and to ride a bicycle.
- Mary likes to hike, swim, and ride a bicycle.

**Note:** Use "to" before all the verbs in a sentence or only before the first one.

## 3. Parallel with infinitive verb phrases:

- They have studied, have practiced, and have improved.
- They have studied, practiced, and improved.

**Note:** Both are correct. Repeating "have" adds clarity (formal); omitting it is smoother (casual). Choose based on tone.

# *Parallel Structure with Clauses*

## Clauses:

- Groups of words containing **S** + **V** which forms part of a sentence.
- A parallel structure that begins with clauses must continue with clauses.

For example:

The coach told the players that they should **get** a lot of sleep, **eat** in moderation, and **do** some warm-up exercises before the game.

# *Parallel Structure Examples*

Which sentences show parallel structure?

1. Dino does not like to sing, dance, or acting.

2. Dino does not like singing, dancing, or acting

1. The production manager was asked to write his report quickly, accurately, and thoroughly.

2. The production manager was asked to write his report quickly, accurately, and in a detailed manner.

1. Aldus was a poor student because he waited until the last minute to study, completed his lab problems carelessly, and lacked motivation.

2. Aldus was a poor student because he waited until the last minute to study, was always completing his lab problems carelessly, and his motivation was low.

# *Parallel Structure Examples*

## Suggested revisions

1. Dino does not like singing, dancing, or acting.  
(All items use **gerunds** (singing, dancing, acting), making the structure consistent.)
2. The production manager was asked to write his report quickly, accurately, and thoroughly.  
(All words are **adverbs** ending in **-ly**, matching in form and function.)
3. Aldus was a poor student because he waited until the last minute to study, completed his lab problems carelessly, and lacked motivation.  
(All items are **past-tense verbs** (waited, completed, lacked), keeping the sentence balanced and consistent.)



# *Parallel Structure Example*

How can you correct this sentence?

The sales rep expected that he would present his product at the meeting, that there would be time for him to show his slide presentation, and that questions would be asked by prospective buyers.

## Revision

The salesman expected that he would present his product at the meeting, that there would be time for him to show his slide presentation, and that prospective buyers would ask him questions

(Each clause starts with “**that**” + **subject** + “**would**” + **verb**)

# *Parallel Structure and Colons*

## Lists after a colon:

Be sure to keep all the elements in a list in the same form.

## What's wrong with this sentence?

The dictionary can be used for these purposes: to find word meanings, pronunciations, correct spellings, and looking up irregular verbs.

## The list mixes different grammatical forms:

- “to find” (infinitive)
- “pronunciations” (noun)
- “correct spellings” (noun)
- “looking up” (gerund)

# *Proofreading Strategies for Parallel Structure*

Use the following proofreading strategies

1. Skim your paper, pausing at "and" and "or." Check if the joined items are parallel.
2. If you have several items in a list, put them in a column.
3. Read your writing out loud. Listen to the sound of the items in a list or the items being compared. Do you hear the same kinds of sounds? Do you hear a “rhythm”?
4. If something breaks that rhythm or repetition of sound, check if it needs to be made parallel.

# *Passive vs. Active Voice*

**Passive voice** indicates what is receiving action not who/what is doing action  
(verb takes form of “to be” + past tense transitive verb; “by” phrase optional)

**Active voice** is considered to be “normal” for English and is more common.

| Passive                               | Active                        |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| The cat was brushed by Johanna.       | Johanna brushed the cat.      |
| Mistakes were made by the government. | The government made mistakes. |
| Dinner was eaten.                     | Someone ate dinner.           |

# *Passive Voice Example*

Why and how might you revise the following the sentence?

The decision that was reached by the committee was to postpone the vote.

1. This sentence is **wordy** and uses **passive voice** which makes it sound indirect and clunky.
2. The phrase "*the decision that was reached*" could be said more clearly and concisely.

Suggested revisions:

**Better:** The committee **reached the decision** to postpone the vote.

**Best:** The committee **decided** to postpone the vote.

# *Passive Voice Example*

Would you revise the following sentences? Why or why not?

1. Michael was robbed in the park last night
2. The disk drive of the computer was damaged by the electrical surge.
3. Those books were purchased especially for tomorrow's lecture

Suggested revision

1. The doer (**agent**) is **unknown** or **irrelevant**

2. The electrical surge damaged the computer's disk drive.

(This sentence is clearer, more concise, and emphasizes the cause with a stronger, more confident tone)

3. You want to **emphasize** the **object** or **result**, not the doer

# *Thank You*

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