

# Sentence Clarity



Purdue OWL staff

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## Sentence Clarity

### **Why worry about making sentences clear?**

- To communicate effectively with the reader.
- To make writing persuasive and interesting.
- To show credibility and authority as a writer.



## Common Clarity Concerns

This presentation will cover **four topics**:

1. Misplaced modifiers
2. Dangling modifiers
3. Parallel Structures
4. Passive Voice



## 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**.



## Modifiers Used for Comedic Effect

Sometimes modifiers are intentionally used for comic effect:

“The other day I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas I’ll never know.”

-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:**

1. What is the modifier?
2. What word does it describe, clarify, or give more detail about?
3. Where should the modifier be placed?



## Misplaced Modifiers

### **Misplaced modifier:**

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

### **Correctly placed modifier:**

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





## One-Word Modifiers

**One-word modifiers** can easily be misplaced.

These include:

**Almost, even, exactly, hardly, just, merely, nearly, only,  
scarcely, simply**



## Misplaced Modifier Examples

**Which sentence indicates that everyone in the class failed the exam?**

- Almost everyone in the class passed the calculus exam.
- Everyone in the class almost passed the calculus exam.

**Which sentence indicates that Jean-Luc earned some money?**

- Jean-Luc nearly earned \$100.
- Jean-Luc earned nearly \$100.



## Misplaced Modifiers Review

### **Misplaced Modifier:**

- Modifier in the wrong place in a sentence.

### **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



## 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 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.



## 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 Examples

### **How might you correct the following sentence?**

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

### **Process:**

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



## Dangling Modifier.

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 Modifiers Review

### **Dangling modifier:**

- 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.
- Applies to words, phrases, or clauses.
- Usually use coordinating conjunctions ("and," "or") to join parallel structures.



## Common Types of Parallel Structure

**Parallel with the -ing** form (gerund) of verbs:

- Mary likes **hiking, swimming, and bicycling.**

**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.



## 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, not **eat** too much, 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.
3. The production manager was asked to write his report quickly, accurately, and thoroughly.
4. The production manager was asked to write his report quickly, accurately, and in a detailed manner.
5. Aldus was a poor student because he waited until the last minute to study, completed his lab problems carelessly, and lacked motivation.
6. 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 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.

Answer:

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.



## Proofreading Strategies For Parallel Structure

### **Use these 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 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.



## Active vs. Passive Voice

**Passive:** The cat was brushed by Johanna.

**Active:** Johanna brushed the cat.

**Passive:** Mistakes were made by the government.

**Active:** The government made mistakes.

**Passive:** Mistakes were made.

**Active:** Someone made mistakes.



## Passive Voice Example

**Why and how might you revise the following sentence?**

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

**Suggested revisions:**

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



## Passive Voice Examples

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

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



Where to Go  
for More Help

Purdue University Writing Lab, Heavilon 226

Check our web site: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu>

Email brief questions to OWL Mail:

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The End

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