Sentences

Sentences with grammar mistakes and unclear semantics (meanings of words and phrases) confuse the reader and undermine the force of your argument. A sentence can succeed or fail on the level of structure, grammar, or meaning.

Sentence Structure

1. **Clauses.** Sentences are based on ***clauses***, which are groups of words containing a ***subject*** and a ***predicate***. The subject is based on a noun or pronoun, and the predicate is a verb phrase that describes what the subject does, has done, or will do. Here is a simple example:

   Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt.

   "Moses" is the subject, and "leads" is the verb that heads the predicate ("leads the Israelites out of Egypt").

   There are two kinds of clause: ***independent clause*** and ***dependent clause***. An independent clause can stand alone as a sentence; it expresses a complete thought. A dependent clause cannot stand alone as a sentence; it requires something else in order to express a complete thought.

   Independent clause. Sam went home early.
   Dependent clause. Because Sam went home early.

   Both clauses have a subject ("Sam") and a verb ("went"), but in grammar and meaning, the ***subordinating coordinator*** ("Because") in the dependent clause points to the need for something else to complete the thought. What happened *because* Sam went home early? Other subordinating coordinators include *although*, *before*, *since*, *unless*, *whereas*, *whether*.

2. **Combining Independent Clauses.** Independent clauses can be combined into more complicated sentences. Every clause has a force of its own. The stronger the force, the stronger the connective bond between the two clauses needs to be. Two independent clauses require very strong connections that include coordinating punctuation and ***coordinating conjunctions*** (*and*, *or*, *nor*, *but*, *yet*, *so*). There are four ways to connect independent clauses:

   - Keep the independent clauses separate with a *period*.

       John Locke lived in self-exile for five years. His political ideas justify resistance to tyranny.

- Connect the independent clauses with a *comma and coordinating conjunction*. The comma is a weak pause and the coordinating conjunction ("and") maintains the equality of the two clauses.

  John Locke lived in self-exile for five years, and his political ideas justify resistance to tyranny.

- The *semicolon* represents a close relationship between the two sentences. Use semicolons only when you want to emphasize the closeness of the relationship between the two ideas expressed in the independent clauses.

  John Locke lived in self-exile for five years; his political ideas justify resistance to tyranny.

- Change one of the clauses into a *dependent clause*. Add a subordinating coordinator to one of the clauses. Do this when you want to emphasize one of the clauses (independent) over the other (dependent).

  John Locke lived in self-exile for five-years because his political ideas justify resistance to tyranny.

3. **Run on sentences** occur if you either lack a coordinator (*fused sentence*) or use one that is not strong enough (*comma splice*). *This is an all-too-common, serious grammatical error.* Run on sentences confuse readers because the two independent clauses compete for the readers' attention. To revise a run on, use one of the four strategies listed in #2 above.

   Fused Sentence. Adam Smith was a Scottish philosopher his best book is *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.
   Revision. Adam Smith was a Scottish philosopher, and his best book is *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

   Comma Splice. Everyone should read Dante's *Comedy*, it is beautifully written.
   Revision. Everyone should read Dante's *Comedy*; it is beautifully written.

4. **Functions of dependent clauses.** Since dependent clauses are not themselves complete sentences, they perform specific functions *within* a sentence. They can serve as an adjective, adverb, or noun. Here are examples of each functions with the dependent clause underlined:

   Adjective clauses modify a noun or pronoun and begin with a relative pronoun, such as *who*, *whom*, *whose*, *that*, *which*.

   Herman Melville, who wrote *Moby Dick*, worked as a customs inspector.

Adverb clauses modify a verb, adjective, or another adverb. They begin with a subordinating coordinator (see #1).

> I'm rereading *Lord of the Rings* <u>because it makes me happy</u>.

Noun clauses function as a noun (person, place, or thing) in the sentence.

> I know <u>who took my copy of *Moby Dick*</u>.

5. **Classification.** Sentences are classified based upon the types of clauses they contain. Thinking about these classifications while writing helps you incorporate sentence variety in your paragraphs. There are four kinds of sentences:

Simple Sentence contains only one independent clause and no dependent clauses. It can contain any number of phrases.

> Despite my initial reluctance, I'm writing a novel.

Compound Sentence contains two or more independent clauses and no dependent clauses.

> John Locke lived in self-exile for five years; his political ideas justify resistance to tyranny.

Complex Sentence contains one independent clause and at least one dependent clause.

> John Locke lived in self-exile for five years because his political ideas justify resistance to tyranny.

Compound-Complex Sentence contains at least two independent clauses and at least one dependent clause.

> Sam is traveling to France before she starts her job, and her friends will meet her in Paris because they're going to a music festival together.

Grammatical Coherence: Subject-Verb Agreement

English grammar can be quite difficult. Since clauses are constituted by the relationship between the subject and predicate, subject-verb agreement is essential to writing grammatically coherent sentences. The basic rules of subject-verb agreement are simple, but there are many cases in which even fluent speakers of the language make mistakes.

Throughout the examples in this section, the subject is underlined once and the verb twice.

1. **The Basics: Singular and Plural.** The fundamental rule of subject-verb agreement is that *singular* subjects take *singular* verbs, and *plural* subjects take *plural* verbs.

   Singular. Sam walks to class.
   Plural. They walk to class together.

   This rule does not change. When the subject or its number is difficult to identify, it is easy to make a mistake. Sometimes confusion occurs because there is a series of words between the subject and verb. Return to the basic question: What is the true subject of this clause? Try reading the sentence without the intervening words to make sure the subject and verb agree.

   A writer as is the case with many professions needs practice to develop the craft.

   Notice the temptation to match the verb ("to need") with the closer noun "professions," which belongs to an intervening dependent clause. The true subject of the independent clause is "writer," which is singular.

2. **Compound Subjects.** In the case of a compound subject connected by *and*, treat the subject as plural. If the compound subject is connected by *or*, then make the verb agree with part of the subject nearer to the verb.

   Ex1. George Orwell and Albert Camus are her favorite authors.
   Ex2. Either my friends or your sister is going to the show.

   Ex2 might read strangely to you even though it is correct. The sentence can be rewritten to avoid the awkward sounding agreement by switching the order of the two subjects: "Either your sister or my friends are going to the show."

   There is one exception to the *and* rule. When *and* fuses two things together and treats them as *one* thing, then treat the subject as singular.

   A bed and breakfast is my favorite kind of hotel to stay in.

3. **Words that can be Singular or Plural.** In English, some words call to mind multiple people. Sometimes these words are singular, and other times they are plural. Their number is determined by the way the word considers the group it references.

They are plural when they consider the group as composed of multiple people or things.

> <u>Some</u> of my peers <u>are graduating</u> early.

They are singular when they consider members of the group individually or as a single-acting collective.

> *Ex1*. <u>Some</u> of the audience <u>was</u> bored during the presentation.
> *Ex2*. <u>Everybody</u> <u>is reading</u> Orwell's *1984* right now.

There are, of course, exceptions to these rules, but even these exceptions follow the spirit of the rule: singular subjects take singular verbs, and plural subjects take plural verbs. Plural nouns that are singular in their meaning, such as *mathematics*, *news*, and *physics*, are an exception. They are treated as singular and take a singular verb.

> <u>Economics</u> <u>is</u> about more than supply and demand.

The number of a relative pronoun (*who*, *which*, *that*) is determined by its antecedent, the noun or pronoun it refers to.

> *Singular.* Adam Smith, <u>who</u> <u>was</u> a philosopher, wrote *The Wealth of Nations*.
> *Plural.* The students, <u>who</u> <u>are</u> philosophy majors, started a book club on campus.

Clarity in Meaning: Word & Phrase Order

Sometimes when a sentence fails to communicate its point, the issue is not its grammatical coherence, but the order of its words and phrases. The location of words and phrases in a sentence can change or obscure its meaning. Consider the cases of faulty predication and the placement of modifying phrases.

1. **Faulty predication** occurs if the meaning of the subject does not match that of the predicate. The result is a sentence that is grammatically coherent, but absurd in its meaning.

> *Ex1*. In an essay, you present evidence to persuade the reader of your position.
> *Problem.* You don't persuade someone of your position; you state your position. You present evidence to *support* your position, and you persuade the reader that the position is *right*.

> *Ex2*. Stoicism is a philosophy where virtue is the highest good.

Problem. Stoicism is neither a place (*where*), nor a time (*when*).
Revision. Stoicism is a philosophy in which virtue is the highest good.

2. **Modifiers.** A *modifier* is an optional word or phrase that comments on or adds information to a word that determines the meaning and properties of a phrase. Since modifiers are dependent on the word they modify, you must think carefully about where you place them in the sentence.

- Keep the modifier as close as possible to the word it modifies.

    Confusing. The teacher admonished the students without anger.
    Clearer. Without anger, the teacher admonished the students.

    Why would the teacher admonish "the students without anger"? Did the teacher want them to be angry? Moving "without anger" to the beginning of the sentence makes it clear the phrase modifies the teacher's action.

- Avoid situations in which a modifier can modify either the word before or after it. This ambiguity is called a ***squinting modifier***.

    Squinting. Reading poetry frequently changes people.

    Does it mean that developing a habit of "frequently reading poetry" changes people? Or does any reading of poetry "frequently change" people? Revise by moving "frequently" to either the beginning or the end of the sentence.

- Be careful where you place limiting modifiers, such as *only*, *nearly*, *almost*, *never*. They modify the word or phrase that immediately follows them. Therefore, when they change position in the sentence, it can change the sentence's meaning. Consider the changing meaning in the example below:

    Only I want Professor West to be at the talk.
    I only want Professor West to be at the talk.
    I want only Professor West to be at the talk.
    I want Professor West to be only at the talk.

- A ***dangling modifier*** is a phrase or clause that is not clearly attached to any word in the sentence. Clear up the ambiguity either by changing the subject of the independent clause or by rewriting the modifier as a complete clause.

    Ex. Reading the *Iliad* last night, dinner was not prepared.
    Problem. Is dinner reading the *Iliad*?
    Revision 1. Reading the *Iliad* last night, I did not prepare dinner.
    Revision 2. While I was reading the *Iliad* last night, dinner was not prepared.