

Frequent Problems in Critical Writing

Problems with Reference

13. Pronouns, Gender Bias. Avoid the exclusive use of *he* or *his* as a neutral singular pronoun. No such neutral form exists in English, though *he* and *his* are often used as if they were neutral. Such usage is offensive to some readers and therefore ought to be avoided. The recourse to the exclusive use of *she* or *her* is an unsatisfactory solution to the problem. Writers ought to use *he or she* or *he/she* (though many people find these cumbersome and inelegant) or they ought to render their sentences in such a way that the plural is used instead (as in this sentence, for example). It is also advisable to use *human (humanity)* or *person* instead of the speciously neutral *man (mankind)*.

14. Pronouns, Errors of Consistency. Do not switch from a singular to a plural pronoun; this problem is especially common in the case of pronouns that refer to the writer and his or her audience. Specific assignments may dictate a specific point of view, and thus may dictate the choice of the first person (*I*) or the third-person singular (*one*, *he*, *she*) or the first-person plural (*we*, the so-called *royal we*). Academic writers rarely use the second person (*you*). It is not, incidentally, an error to use the first person in academic discourse; nor is the first-person singular *we* necessarily royal, for a writer may want to allude to a specific community of readers. The rule here, as in some much else that has to do with style, is clarity and judicious usage.

The first person singular is problematic only when overused; it will usually be clear that it is in fact *the writer* who makes the statements in a paper. However, the judicious use of *I* for emphasis (ex: *I believe that* or *I will argue that*) is perfectly legitimate. The use of *one* leads often to stuffiness, while *he* exclusively leads to problems of gender bias (see #13). The first-person plural can be useful when indicating the presumed agreement of writer and audience.

a) We can easily see the problems that result from pronoun inconsistency.

However, it can also lead to a presumption of agreement that may not exist. In general, be consistent; avoid switching from first to third to second and back to first.

15. Pronouns, Impersonal Constructions. Constructions such as *there is* and *it is* can be useful from time to time to vary sentence patterns. But they often lead to a lack of clarity or a general fuzziness. Use sparingly.

16. Pronouns, Unclear Referent. Always match pronouns with a clearly delineated referent to which the pronoun refers. This error is often signaled by unclear use of *it*, *this* and *that*, *here* and *there*, for which there is no clear referent. Avoid beginning sentences with these words when it is not clear what they refer to.

17. Pronouns, Agreement. When using words like *everyone*, *someone*, etc., good syntax requires a singular pronoun. *Their* is not yet an acceptable neutral singular pronoun; therefore, readers are likely to see grammatical disagreement.

a) The person at the door was whispering like the wind;
they were telling the occupants of their impending
deaths.

In example *a*, the plural pronoun *they* is incorrect because the word to which it refers, *the person*, is singular. Use *he* or *she* or, if gender is known either *he* or *she* (see #14 above) or rewrite the sentence in the plural to avoid the problem, such as *b*).

b) There was a whisper at the door that told the
occupants of their impending deaths.

It is important to note that third-person singular pronouns are important stylistically, for they make it possible to avoid repeating proper names unnecessarily.

Problems with Style

18. Sentence Fragments. Fragments occur when a writer composes a sentence without a subject or verb.

a) The paperwork piling up.

They also occur when a *dependent* phrase or clause is preceded by a semicolon.

b) We define feminism as an awareness of women's oppression-repression; *therefore applying* "radical feminists" in a different sense.

The fragment in *b)* occurs because *applying* precedes a dependent participial clause. This sentence requires either a change of punctuation (a comma) or an *independent* clause after the semicolon.

c) We define feminism as an awareness of women's oppression-repression, *therefore applying* "radical feminists" in a different sense.

d) We define feminism as an awareness of women's oppression-repression; *therefore, theorists apply* "radical feminists" in a different sense.

Often fragments are formed involving relative pronouns, which occur with *dependent* clauses and cannot stand alone.

e) Everyone was excited about the upcoming poetry reading. *The date of which was yet to be announced.*

There is no subject in the second clause. The word *date* might suggest a subject, but the *of which* still signals a dependent clause. One can alleviate such problems by punctuating correctly with a comma.

f) Everyone was excited about the upcoming poetry reading, the date of which was yet to be announced.

Finally, fragments can occur in the improper use of quotations. In the following example, a fragment from *Robinson Crusoe* makes the sentence that contains it also a fragment.

g) Crusoe wrote "Friday being now left to his liberty"
(95).

This sentence would be grammatically complete and independent if the writer substituted *was* in brackets for *being*. The writer could also add *that* in brackets after *wrote*.

h) Crusoe wrote [that] "Friday [was] now left to his
liberty" (95).

Consult a handbook of grammar for more details on phrases, clauses, and proper use of punctuation. See #116.

19. Comma Usage. Commas serve various purposes in a sentence. Here are some of the most important examples. **I.** Most parenthetical expressions are set off by commas: *for example, on the other hand, for instance*, etc. **II.** Commas are used to separate expressions in a series.

III. As a rule, the comma is used between the principal parts of a compound sentence joined by a conjunction (*and, but, or, nor, so yet, while*); the comma can be omitted if the sentence is very brief or the subject does not change.

a) Theory lays the foundation for many disciplines, but
experience is essential for success.

b) Their country called and they went.

IV. Use a comma after an introductory adverb clause.

c) Unfortunately, the train had left the station.

V. Use a comma to set off non-restrictive phrases and clauses. A nonrestrictive adjective clause does not answer the question "Which one(s)?" Instead it gives additional information, even though the sentence would make sense without that information.

d) Tom Sawyer, *who felt like playing*, tried to get out of
whitewashing the fence.

This additional information can take the form of an *appositive phrase* in which case it merely repeats or clarifies the noun it modifies. Thus, “Tom Sawyer, the boy-hero of Twain’s novel, tried to get out of whitewashing the fence.”

If the omission of the subordinate clause would change the meaning of the principal clause or destroy its sense, the clause is restrictive, and no comma is required. For both *e)* and *f)*, one can ask the question “Which one(s)?” The sentence answers that questions, which makes it restrictive.

e) Maya Angelou and Rita Dove are African-American poets who express incisive emotions.

f) The swashbuckler wore boots that reached to his knees.

20. Comma Splices. A comma splice occurs when a writer tries to join two independent clauses with a comma, when what he or she needs is a period or semicolon. Example *a)* is one of the most common sentence structure mistakes.

a) I was trying to decide if I should go, however, the problem was solved for me.

b) I was trying to decide if I should go; however, the problem was solved for me.

This sentence requires a full stop (a period or semicolon) after *go*. Some comma splices can be remedied with the insertion of *coordinating conjunctions* (and, or, but, nor, so, for, yet). For instance:

c) I was going to tell her, she deserved to know.

d) I was going to tell her, for she deserved to know.

By placing the word *for* in front of *she*, the coordination of the sentence becomes clear. The sentence now stresses the reason she needs to know and eliminates the need for a full stop.

21. Semicolons. The semicolon serves, grammatically speaking, the same function as the period: it marks a full stop and sets off two independent clauses. The difference from a period is that the semicolon connects independent clauses that are *thematically or narratively related*. Note, in example **20b** above, how two related but grammatically independent clauses are linked with a semicolon.

As with all points of grammar, if you want to find out more information and/or more examples, consult one of the handbooks listed below under #116 Study Aids.

22. Run-on Sentences. This problem is very similar to a comma splice, except that the run-on has no punctuation whatsoever. A run-on is ungrammatical and usually requires a full stop (period or semicolon) to render it grammatical.

a) Woolf tries to represent her characters' consciousnesses by stream of consciousness she does this by letting the reader into her characters' heads so to speak in order to witness their thoughts.

This sentence could be corrected by placing a period or semicolon after *consciousness* and by placing commas before and after the interjection.

b) Woolf tries to represent her characters by stream of consciousness. She does this by letting the reader into her characters' heads, so to speak, in order to witness their thoughts.

Another kind of run-on occurs when a writer's sentence sprawls, when phrases and/or clauses are linked together with little or no punctuation.

c) Sprawl usually results from putting too much information into one sentence and the sentence allows no pause for breath which makes it difficult for the reader to know where he or she is going, and that can be a problem, if you can follow my drift that is if you get my meaning in this sentence for example.

This sort of run-on sentence is best abandoned and the idea it was meant to express given a simpler and clearer form.

23. Subject-Verb, Agreement. Problems with subject-verb agreement occur when a writer fails to match the *number* of the subject (singular or plural) with the *person* of the verb (first, second, third).

a) The museums of the city provides great cultural diversity.

b) The museums of the city provide great cultural diversity.

Note that the subject of the verb is *museums*, not *city*. Other problems arise with enumerations. Both *c)* and *d)* are correct.

c) Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton are required reading in English literature programs.

d) Chaucer, along with Shakespeare and Milton, is required reading in English literature programs.

24. Subject-Verb, Splitting. Do not use a comma between subject and verb and avoid splitting subject and verbs with qualifying material. In the following example, the subject *man* is at too great a remove from the verb *walked*.

a) The man, who was tall and very well equipped to tackle the problem that our office was facing, walked calmly into the room.

25. Syntax, Problems with. The kind of stylistic awkwardness typically associated with beginning writers or writers working with new conventions is the result either of improper idiomatic usage or of improper or inelegant phrasing.

Idiomatic Usage. This is characterized by the misuse of prepositions and prepositional phrases. “Idiomatic” refers to the characteristic ways that a specific language creates phrases that are unique to that language. This can apply even to different forms of the same language. For example, Americans wait *in* line, while Britons wait *on* line. Errors in idiom are more often a specific sort of *syntactical* error usually involving the misuse of prepositions (especially of, from, about, through). See #29. Examples *a)* and *c)* are unidiomatic.

a) The poem moves *through* principles of music.

b) The poem moves *by* principles of music.

c) She made the point *in* reference to the vocabulary of farming.

d) She made the point *with* reference to the vocabulary of farming.

Improper Phrasing. This is characterized by *lack of clarity*, *wordiness*, *sentence sprawl*, etc. Awkward phrasing is typically *unclear or vague*; correcting these sentences usually entails clarification and/or detail. These sentences may not be ungrammatical but are in any case not quite good English sentences.

a) I feel that Joyce's stories have been set in a timeframe of suffering and uncaring that the characters cannot relate to.

The problem here is that certain words (*timeframe, suffering, uncaring*) are ambiguous and the phrasing is not quite good English. Also, the phrase *I feel* is unnecessary. The reader has no way of knowing quite what is being said. A revision would attempt to clarify the writer's ideas.

b) Joyce's stories concern characters that cannot relate to the suffering of colonial Dublin.

Note that in this revision, the sentence, in addition to being less wordy, now has a strong declarative verb, the word *relate* has its proper object (*suffering*) and the kind of suffering is more fully implied by specifying the time-frame (*colonial Dublin*).

Inelegant Phrasing. Inelegant phrasing This is characterized often by *improper modification (esp. dangling or misplaced modifiers), unclear subordination or coordination, or errors in idiomatic usage (esp. prepositions and prepositional phrases)*. This problem is particularly evident in the misuse of adverb modifiers and is rooted in an unclear sense of how phrases and clauses fit together.

a) In Clara's article, she said the exact opposite.

The problem here is that the reader does not know who *she* is. If we place the adverb modifier after the independent clause, the problem becomes more apparent. It is not always self-evident that the she is the same as the name in the adverb modifier. Better to use the proper name in the main part of the sentence (the *independent clause*).

b) In her article, Clara said the exact opposite.

Inelegant phrasing can often be the result of mixing phrases and clauses that do not go together.

c) As time passed, I became keenly aware of just how high a price childhood was.

Here the writer has the right idea, but expresses it ungrammatically. He or she might revise the second half to eliminate the awkward *to be* verb.

d) As time passed, I became keenly aware of the high price of childhood.

Garbled Syntax. All of the above are distinct from *garbled syntax*. This usually occurs when sentences have been incorrectly transcribed from a draft or mangled during revision or when two different kinds of sentences, leading to different syntactical ends, are spliced together. This problem occurs frequently when students revise on a word processor; students must be careful that phrases meant to be deleted are indeed deleted and that printers do their proper job of printing.

26. Sentence Structure Variety. The writer must also strive for *sentence variety*. He or she would want to avoid too many short, simple declarative sentences starting with the same or similar subjects. Using adverbial phrases and clauses to avoid the tendency to being each sentence with a subject-verb structure is a good idea, as is the judicious and sparing use of passive constructions. Try to interweave simple declarative sentences with longer, more complexly qualified sentences.

27. Parallelism, Faulty. This problem occurs when a writer strings phrases together in such a way that they do not parallel each other syntactically.

a) Woolf tends to use semicolons as commas, *quotes* characters' thoughts and *is* always *switching* from one character's thoughts to another's.

To revise this sentence, the writer must put all the phrases into the same syntactic form.

b) Woolf tends to use semicolons as commas, *to quote* characters' thoughts, and *to switch* from one character's thoughts to another's.

Note that all the items in the series begin with infinitives.

28. Transitions. Transition problems occur when the writer has failed to make a logical connection between sentences that support a central topic sentence. It can also occur between paragraphs. This problem usually indicates a failure to signal a change in direction or the introduction of a new stage in the development of a complex topic. Remedies can be as simple as adding a single *conjunctive adverb* (however, moreover, but) or as complicated as writing two or three connecting or transitional sentences. See #29-30.

29. Transitional Devices.

Result: therefore, thus, as a result, hence, consequently

Contrast: however, nevertheless, on the other hand, still
Likeness: similarly, likewise
Alternative: instead
Addition: furthermore, moreover, in addition, also
Example: for instance, for example
Emphasis: indeed, of course, in fact
Repetition: that is, in other words, as mentioned earlier
Conclusion: in conclusion, to summarize, in short
Concession: granted, admittedly
Time: recently, now, afterward, later, meanwhile, first,
next, then, simultaneously, finally
Place: here, elsewhere, below, adjacent to, to the left

30. Conjunctions, Subordinating.

Temporal: after, before, since, while, when, whenever, until
Causal: because, as
Conditional: if, although, unless, whether, whereas

31. Verbs, Inconsistency in Tenses. All verb tenses should be consistent with the points in time to which the verbs refer.

a) I worked as a professional saxophonist during the day
but I play in the evenings for enjoyment.

Here, the time difference is general; there is no particular day or night referred to; thus, the verbs should both be either past or present. Tense consistency can be tricky, especially with perfect tenses (have gone, had been, etc.). A simple rule of thumb is to keep track of the time frame and adjust verb tenses accordingly.

32. Literary Present Tense. It is conventional to use the *present tense* when describing “textual” events or realities or when analyzing literary texts outside their historical or biographical contexts.

b) Bloom walks through Dublin on June 16, 1904, and
encounters many people doing next to nothing.

Note that while Bloom’s actions are clearly in the past, we as readers always experience them in a “textual” reality that is a kind of perpetual present. When we speak of *Ulysses* as the product of certain historical factors, we speak of it (and Bloom’s walk) as taking place in the past and thus use the past tense.

33. Verbals, Problems with. Avoid verb contractions in formal writing; they are fine in spoken English and informal writing. By the

same token, avoid split infinitives. Star Trek may have made the split infinitive idiomatic—we are told *To boldly go where no man has gone before*—but in formal writing it is better *to go boldly* where others have gone before.

34. Passive Voice. Avoid the overuse of passive voice (usually constructions with a form of *to be*, a *past participle*, and often a *by*) whenever possible. The problem is not grammatical but stylistic, as it eliminates or defers the subject of an action.

- a) A pleasant atmosphere *was created* in the store *by* the recorded music.
- b) It *can be seen* that Joyce disregarded the conventions of syntax.

In examples *a)* and *b)*, the passive voice tends to obscure the subject (who created the pleasant atmosphere? does it matter who sees Joyce's disregard?). Example *b)* is especially common in literature papers. Eliminate the useless verbiage (*It can be seen that*) and stick with a more powerful declarative sentence with a strong active verb (*disregarded*).

- c) The store managers *created* a pleasant atmosphere with recorded music.
- d) Joyce *disregarded* the conventions of syntax.

It is possible, however, to use the passive voice for *rhetorical effect*—especially if a writer wishes to begin a sentence with a particular emphasis.

- e) The laughter from the attic *was discovered* by Jane too late to serve as a warning.

Here, the writer may have wanted to begin the sentence with a reference to *laughter* and to hold off revealing who discovered it. This strategy may also be used to *vary sentence patterns*. The general rule is to avoid the passive voice if it muddies the reader's understanding of who does what or if it leads to wordiness.

35. Word Choice. Faulty word choice is frequently a problem having to do with failing to achieve the appropriate level of diction. It can occur when the writer has chosen the wrong word or a word that is not quite right. Faulty word choice also occurs when a writer uses an inappropriate level of diction. *Slang, colloquialisms, informal* or *dialectal* usage, though not improper in and of themselves, are generally inappropriate in the kind of writing expected in university English courses. Also

inappropriate is the use of technical, obscure, or obsolete words in an effort to make a paper sound erudite. It is usually a good idea to avoid Latinate words when there is a perfectly good Anglo-Saxon equivalent (use for utilize, fire for conflagration, help for facilitate, etc.). Try to achieve a level of diction that is neither too highfalutin' nor too casual. Recall Mark Twain's pithy remark that the "difference between the *almost-right* word & the *right* word is really a large matter—it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning" (Source: Bartlett, John. *Familiar Quotations*. 16th ed. Boston: Little Brown, 1992. 527).

36. Verbs, Analytical. Aside from using terminology specific to the discussion of literary texts, critical writers should upgrade their vocabulary and sharpen their analytical expressions by using more analytical verbs. The following are commonly used: to demonstrate, to illustrate, to show, to depict, to display, to establish, to evidence, to prove, to reveal, to exhibit, to present, to illuminate, to represent, to picture, to symbolize, to denote, to express, to imply, to delineate, to outline, to sketch, to elucidate, etc.

37. Possessives. Apostrophes are used to denote the possessive case. They are also used in verb contractions (which are usually avoided in formal writing). In the case of pronouns, do not confuse verb contractions with the possessive case. *It's* is a verb contraction for *it is* and is not the possessive case of *it*, which is *its*. Hint: possessive pronouns do not have apostrophes (his, hers, yours, theirs, etc). Omitting the apostrophe in proper nouns constitutes a grammatical error.

38. Abbreviations, Latin. Latin abbreviations should be used sparingly but in any case properly. *i.e.*, for *that is*; *e.g.*, for *for example*; [*sic*] to indicate variant spelling or usage that appears in the original. *Etc.* (for *et cetera*) should be avoided in formal essays. Its use usually substitutes a lack of specificity.

39. Capitalization. Avoid capitalizing abstract nouns, unless they appear in the original.

40. Hyphen, Dash. Hyphen is used for compound nouns and compound adjectives. Two hyphens with no space before, between or after (or one long hyphen) are used for a dash: -- or —. A dash is often used for lengthy injections or interruptions and should be used sparingly.

41. Quoting and Underlining. Use underlining or italicizing for foreign words that are not commonly used in English. Quotation marks or italics are often used to emphasize words and phrases but should be used sparingly. It is permissible to underline or italicize when citing the

words of another, as long as the writer indicates that such emphasis is his or hers.

42. Names of Authors and Characters. Use an author's full name the first time it appears and thereafter use the last name only. Use the character's name that is employed in the literary text. Jane, not Ms. Eyre.