

University of Houston Clear Lake

WRITING CENTER

Tips on Revising Sentence Problems

If you are having problems with sentence structure, this might mean that you are still working through a complex idea. Regarding sentence structure problems as opportunities for revision is far more productive than viewing them as violations of grammar rules. Thinking through connections more carefully should help you understand your topic and clarify your message.

Misplaced Modifiers

“Modifying” elements come in two styles: those that modify the entire sentence (free) and those that modify only one element in a sentence (restricted). Free modifiers can be placed anywhere in a sentence, but restricted modifiers must be placed next to the element they modify.

Modification problems are created when a restricted modifier is misplaced in the sentence and appears to be modifying an element it logically cannot. Some examples are:

- Breaking into the window of the girl's dormitory, the dean of men surprised ten members of the football team. (Who was really breaking into the dormitory?)
- Yoko Ono will talk about her husband, John Lennon, who was killed in an interview with Barbara Walters. (How did he die?)
- Plunging 1,000 feet into the gorge, we saw Yosemite Falls. (Who or what was plunging?)
- The patient was referred to a psychiatrist with severe emotional problems. (Who had problems?)
- By allowing patients to talk about their illness, they are given insight. (Who is allowing?)
- By having students read the books, students will understand. . . (Who is having?)

In each case, the position of the modifier implies that it is providing information about the subject that precedes or follows it, creating a logical inconsistency. Misplaced modifiers indicate either an **organization problem** (what goes with what?) or an **agency problem** (who is doing what?) Revising for this problem will involve asking these two questions, thinking through how the ideas fit together, and then altering the sentence accordingly.

Faulty Predication

Faulty predication occurs when the subject and verb in a sentence are not logically compatible. Examples are:

- Character is the way a person reacts to his life situations. (Can character be a way?)
- Illness shall be qualified for sick pay. (Can an illness be qualified?)

Again, it is important to ask why the sentence represents ideas the way it does. In the case of faulty predication, it is very possible that you were attempting to pull yourself out of the prose, which results in a sort of “false subject” that attempts to complete an action it is not capable of. This is another example of an **agency problem** and asking who is doing what will help you restructure such sentences.

Mixed Constructions

A mixed construction happens when the object of a verb or a preposition takes a verb itself and becomes a subject within the same sentence. This usually happens because there are two competing ideas in the sentence that have not been fully processed, resulting in a **relationship problem**. Revising often requires “unpacking” the ideas and then subordinating or connecting the ideas in a way that shows their relationship to each other.

Example: They expose themselves in their writing to an atmosphere of respect is essential.

Revised: They expose themselves in their writing; therefore, an atmosphere of respect is essential.

Example: Although this idea originated with Plato’s philosophy is the most explanation of the world to date.

Revised: Although the idea originated with Plato, his philosophy remains the most important explanation of the world to date.

Faulty Parallelism

Parallelism can be easy to accomplish when the items we place in relationship to each other occur in simple lists. For example:

My responsibilities included the following:

- Filing papers
- Answering phones
- Edited the annual report

In this example, it is pretty easy to see that the final item in the list is not presented in the same grammatical structure as the others. The last bullet should be “editing the annual report.”

Correct parallelism is more difficult to accomplish when the ideas we are comparing are embedded in a complex sentence. Either way, it is an **organizational problem**. What goes with what? Which items are being compared? Which items go in the same container as others?

Example: Vitamin A is found not only in vegetables, but eggs and butter also have it.

The first verb is in the passive voice with a preposition phrase; the second is in the active voice and takes a direct object.

Revised: Vitamin A is found not only in vegetables, but also in eggs and butter.

Example: In order to accomplish this, we will work on several aspects of physical fitness as well as learning how to play several sports.

In this case, “will work” is a functioning verb in the simple future tense, while “learning” is a present participle and not actually a functioning verb.

Revised: In order to accomplish this, we will work on several aspects of physical fitness and will learn how to play several sports.

Or

In order to accomplish this, we will work on several aspects of physical fitness, including learning how to play several sports.