

COMMON SENTENCE-LEVEL WRITING ISSUES

Write in Complete Sentences: Look for comma splices, fragments, and run-on sentences. A comma splice is a specific type of run-on sentence in which a writer joins two independent clauses with a comma and leaves out a coordinating conjunction (e.g. I hit the ball, I ran to first base. Correct: I hit the ball, and I ran to first base.) A sentence fragment is part of a sentence that is set off as if it were a whole sentence. To test a sentence for completeness, look for the sentence's subject and verb, and then make sure the clause is not subordinate. Subordinate clauses serve as parts of sentences—nouns or modifiers—not as whole sentences (e.g. When the government devised the Internet. Correct: When the government devised the Internet, no expansive computer network existed.) Run-on sentences fuse two independent clauses together, and, depending on your intended meaning, can be corrected by: making the clauses into two, separate sentences; inserting a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction (such as *and* or *but*); inserting a semi-colon between the clauses; or subordinating one clause to the other.

Use Parallel Structure: Whenever you use a series, either in a sentence or in a list, try to give the parts of the series in parallel grammatical structure. That is, call attention to the similarities of the items in the series or list by using the same grammatical structure to introduce or name each one (e.g. #1: The meeting will deal with manufacturing, distributing, and how we market our products. Correct: The meeting will deal with manufacturing, distributing, and marketing. e.g. #2: This semester I plan to finish my thesis, applying for jobs, and taught creative writing. Correct: This semester I plan to finish my thesis, apply for jobs, and teach creative writing.)

Pronoun Reference: Pronouns (I, you, he, she, it, we, you, they, them, their, me, mine, my, our, ours, who, whom, some, any, few, etc.) should clearly refer to the nouns they stand for. For example, “Managers like engineers because they are pragmatic and logical” is ambiguous because it does not tell clearly whether the managers or the engineers are “pragmatic and logical.” You might revise the sentence this way: “Managers like the logical, pragmatic approach that engineers take to problems.” In this sentence, “John called the Quality Assurance manager, but he was busy and didn’t follow through,” who was busy, John or the manager? Try it this way: “After he called the Quality Assurance manager, John got busy and didn’t follow through.”

Misplaced Modifiers: Always place modifiers so that they point clearly to the word or phrase they modify. If you get them out of place, they will refer to the wrong part of your sentence. To illustrate this, let’s look at the word *only*, which often causes problems. In the sentence “He only arrived this morning,” you would be saying the he arrived this morning and did nothing else. What you would mean, though, is that “He arrived only this morning.” In the revised sentence, *only* modifies when he arrived, rather than his arrival itself. Similarly, *only* is misplaced in this sentence: “He only said that to make you feel good.” Instead, you should write, “He said that only to make you feel good.”

Dangling Modifiers: Dangling modifiers point to something that is not part of the sentence. That is, in the process of writing the sentence, a writer leaves out the word or

phrase that the modifier points to. For example, “Knowing that you are a careful worker, the finished product will be excellent,” says that the finished product knows you are a careful worker. Revise the sentence to show who knows, like this: “Knowing that you are a careful worker, we are sure the finished product will be excellent.”

While misplaced and dangling modifiers will sometimes obscure your meaning, more often they will suggest that you are a careless writer who does not know or care enough to construct sentences carefully. Either way, as writers, we want to write as clearly as possible, and we don’t want to seem as if we are careless, especially when we are trying to solicit work from an individual or business.

Rewrite the following sentences so that they avoid the stylistic faults described above. Keep in mind that there is more than one way to revise each sentence.

The new union contract should do three things. Reduce the number of grievances. We should be able to go three years without a strike. And it should also enable us to increase our production.

Looking at next year’s production, custom-built products should be up about 50 percent.

We will need to have all field reports as soon as possible. Certainly by the end of March.

By arranging the typing pool, productivity increased by 15 percent.

The Production Control Department has designed a new inventory form. Which they say will help them keep track of raw material more closely.

Management Information Systems has devised a computer program that will allow everyone in the Accounting Department to know about transactions as soon as they occur, this should keep our cash flow at a maximum. Especially on weekends.

The company has devised a new retirement plan. They hope it will encourage a number of people to retire early.

Before we approve the new product we need to know if it will be profitable, whether it will attract new customers, and how durable it is.

We finally gave up all hope of finishing on Thursday. The meeting having lasted well past five o'clock.

This handout was borrowed and adapted from Richard P. Batteiger's Business Writing: Process and Forms (Wadsworth Publishing Company, California) and from The Little, Brown Compact Handbook.