

AN EXERCISE IN STYLE

Style is the signature of the author, the experience of his or her personality; consequently, the primary objective of an author is precision of expression. The goal of correctness and effectiveness of expression is to say what one means and to mean what one says.

Listed below are explanations and examples of a few stylistic errors which you ought to avoid in the draft or remedy in the revision of your writing.

MISPLACED MODIFIERS

A misplaced modifier is a word, phrase, or clause that is out of place, resulting in an awkward or confusing sentence. In most cases, modifiers should be near the words they modify. This is particularly true for the following words: almost, just, hardly, even, not, nearly, merely, and only. For example:

MM: I turned in my essay to Ms. Jinx that had been revised.
Clear: I turned in my essay that had been revised to Ms. Jinx.
I turned in my revised essay to Ms. Jinx.

MM: Ms. Jinx only grades one revision of each paper.
Clear: Ms. Jinx grades only one revision of each paper.

Notice the several different possible locations for the adverb "only" in the following sentences. Each one could be correct depending upon the writer's purpose. Which message would you wish to receive; which message would you wish to send?

1. Only Jay said he loved me.
2. Jay only said he loved me.
3. Jay said he only loved me.
4. Jay said he loved only me.

DANGLING MODIFIERS

A dangling modifier is often an introductory word group with no clear reference to some other word in the sentence. For example:

Dangling: After walking into the room, the radio was turned on.
Clear: After walking into the room, Joe turned on the radio.
After Joe walked into the room, he turned on the radio.

Dangling: Writing for five hours, the first draft was finally done.
Clear: Writing for five hours, she finally finished the first draft.

Dangling: Weary after such a long pilgrimage, the note told of his sojourns in many strange lands.

Clear: Weary after such a long pilgrimage, the traveler told of his sojourns in many strange lands.

PARALLELISM

Parallelism means to write balanced sentences; lists or ideas that are logically related should be expressed in similar ways. In addition, using the following pairs of correlative conjunctions requires parallel construction: both/and, either/or, neither/nor, whether/or, not only/but also. Good writers use parallelism effectively, especially when connecting ideas. Furthermore, we recognize parallelism not only in sentences but also in passages, such as Ecclesiastes' parallel description of the times and seasons. Here is an interpretation of the theme of reaping what one sows illustrated in parallel construction:

Sow a thought, and reap a deed.
Sow a deed, and reap a habit.
Sow a habit, and reap a character.
Sow a character, and reap a destiny.

Study the following examples:

Non-Parallel: I like to read, writing, and traveling.

Parallel: I like to read, write, and travel.

I like reading, writing, and traveling.

Non-Parallel: She is not only a funny person but also has brains.

Parallel: She is not only a funny person but a smart one.

She is not only funny but also smart.

She is both funny and smart.

She is neither funny nor smart. (Yes, this changes the meaning!)

FAULTY COMPARISONS

Comparisons in a sentence must be logical and complete. Faulty comparisons, however, equate apples and oranges; that is, they make incompatible unions which often lead to problematic marriages. For example, the concept of "other" and "else" could often make for more harmonious unions when the subjects are compatible:

Faulty: I like you better than anybody.

Clear: I like you better than anybody else.

Faulty: You are brighter than any of my classmates.

Clear: You are brighter than any of my other classmates.

Faulty: Mr. Dee is tougher than any teacher at Sinclair.

Clear: Mr. Dee is tougher than any other teacher at Sinclair.

Also study the following examples:

Faulty: My car is nicer than my wife.

Clear: My car is nicer than my wife's (car).

Faulty: Ann is one of the best, if not the best, teacher at UD.

Clear: Ann is one of the best teachers at UD, if not the best.

OMISSIONS

Omissions, like other actions, are of two kinds: the correct and the incorrect. Correct omissions are often found in adages and aphorisms; for instance, "To err is human, to forgive divine." However, writers must be careful not to omit words that are necessary to their meaning. Study these examples:

Incorrect: His homework is easy, but his tests difficult.

Correct: His homework is easy, but his tests are difficult.

Incorrect: I have and always will try to do my best on the job.

Correct: I have tried and always will try to do my best on the job.

Incorrect: I have written a story and essay about my vacation.

Correct: I have written a story and an essay about my vacation.

IS WHERE/IS WHEN

Generally avoid using "is where/was where" or "is when/was when." A time is when; a place is where, but a thing, idea, emotion, or act is what it is, just as a person is who he or she is. We define our thoughts and feelings usually in terms of what they are. For example: Comedy is life viewed at a distance, while tragedy is life viewed close at hand; life is comedy to one who thinks and tragedy to one who feels.

Even when used correctly, these constructions are wordy: "Eight o'clock is when I eat breakfast" could just as well be written as "I eat breakfast at eight o'clock." "Dayton is where I live" could be written more concisely as "I live in Dayton." In particular, avoid using them in definitions. Study these examples:

Incorrect: Happiness is when you live in Dayton, Ohio.

Correct: Happiness is living in Dayton, Ohio.

Incorrect: A run-on is where two sentences are joined incorrectly.

Correct: A run-on is two sentences joined incorrectly.
