

Word Choice, Order and Placement

English is a forgiving and accommodating language. As writers have a lot of leeway when it comes to deciding how to word phrases and structure sentences.

- Simple Sentence - Consist of a single independent clause.
- Compound Sentence - Consist of multiple independent clauses.
- Complex Sentence - Consist of at least one dependent clause and at least one independent clause.

Sentences can contain phrases in addition to clauses and even when writers use incomplete sentences or fragments readers often easily understand the text's meaning.

We can put absolute phrases at the beginning of a sentence, in the middle, or at the end of the same sentence, and comprehension doesn't suffer.

We can separate modifiers such as adverbs from the words they modify, and *still* readers can understand.

This is just a reminder that while we do have that leeway and flexibility with wording and structuring sentences, sometimes it does matter where the words go. Sometimes unexpected word order can cause confusion. At other times word order may create a meaning that the writer hadn't intended.

Sometimes it's not word order that causes problems but the word choice or sentence construction that can cause a sentence can unintentionally have two meanings.

Let's consider a few instances when we might not be as clear with our words as we should be.

Advertising Examples

Ever hear something like this in TV and radio ads?

- “If you're tired of paying too much for car insurance, have we got a deal for you.”
 - But if I'm not tired of paying too much, I don't get a deal, is that what you're saying?
- “If you're looking for the perfect Valentine gift, we're the best jeweler in town.”
 - But if I'm not looking for the perfect Valentine gift, you're not the best jeweler?

Can you think of a slight change that would keep listeners from mentally going a place retailers and advertisers don't want them going?

Both

The word *both* sometimes gets into a sentence in a way that produces confusion rather than clarity. One problem is redundancy.

- They both reached out for each other's hands.
- They both saluted each other.
 - In these sentences, there's no need for both *each other* and *both*. Either alone is sufficient.
 - They reached out for each other's hands.
 - They both saluted.

Adverb Placement

Misplaced Modifiers

Adverbs can be found at a distance from the word they modify. Some adverbs, especially adverbs of focus (*only*, *just*, *even*), need to be placed immediately before the words they modify. otherwise they're modifying the wrong word or phrase. Or at least the wrong word or phrase for your purposes.

Just

- Just Bobby showed up for the award ceremony.
- Bobby just showed up for the award ceremony.
- Bobby showed up just for the award ceremony.
- Bobby showed up for just the award ceremony.

Even

- Liza failed and ended up having to repeat the class.
- Liza even failed and ended up having to repeat the class.
- Liza failed and even ended up having to repeat the class.
- Liza failed and ended up even having to repeat the class.
- Liza failed and ended up having to even repeat the class.
- Liza failed and ended up having to repeat even the class.

Other Misplaced Modifiers

Prepositional phrases operate as modifiers and can cause confusion or double takes of some sentences.

- Jason was arrested for indecent exposure in the middle of Main Street.
 - Was Jason arrested in the middle of Main Street or is that where he exposed himself?
- The victim was found stabbed to death by a relative in her home on Tuesday.
 - Did the relative do the stabbing or the finding?

Dangling Modifier

Every writer is warned about dangling modifiers. Yet sometimes we don't notice when the modifier –often a participial phrase– isn't modifying the subject of the sentence and thus is left dangling.

- Jumping up and down, the ball skipped over Luke's head.
- Cashing in on early retirement, the option was a good one for Lucinda.
 - Luke is the one jumping up and down, and Lucinda is the one cashing in on early retirement. These sentences both need reworking.
 - While Luke _____ .
 - Lucinda cashed _____ .

Squinting Modifier

A squinting modifier could be modifying the word or phrase before it or the word(s) after it. Rewrite for clarity when modifiers squint.

- The man who married recently divorced.
 - Did he marry recently or divorce recently?
- Taking the time to plan clearly is the best choice.
 - Which word or phrase is *clearly* modifying?

Absent or Unclear Antecedents

Pronouns without clear antecedents can also cause problems. Be sure that pronouns refer to a specific noun, one that's been included in the text.

- Every time the bookmobile came to my school, I wanted to buy dozens of them.
 - The speaker likely means that she wanted to buy dozens of books, yet the word *books* hasn't been mentioned.
- Tom and Bill went to his house.
 - Whose house? Make sure that pronouns clearly refer to a specific antecedent.

Readers can often figure out what is meant when a sentence can be read multiple ways. Yet even momentary confusion can distract from your story and interrupt the bliss you want your reader to experience. It's best to search for and rework unclear or confusing phrasing. Beta readers and critique partners can be good detectors of these kinds of errors; if you're prone to creating confusing sentences, have a friend or colleague look over your text. But you should also search for problem words yourself. Help readers so that they don't have to stop reading and step out of your adventure in order to make sense of a confusing sentence. TWG