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## SYNTAX AND MECHANICS POINTERS

### I. Phrases

A phrase is a group of related words *used as a single part of speech*.<sup>1</sup> They mainly add variety to and relieve monotony of sentences. Look at the following sentences:

Vietnamese scarves are all the rage this season.

Scarves from Vietnam are all the rage this season.

I sadly looked at her.

I looked at her with sadness.

Note that the subsequent sentences mean the same thing. Only in the first sentence, a single word is used to modify the noun *scarves* whereas in the second one, a group of words modify *scarves*. Likewise in the third sentence, one word – *sadly* – modify the verb *looked* whereas in the second one, a group of words – *with sadness* – modifies the same verb *looked*.

### KINDS OF PHRASES

#### Divisions according to Form

Phrases may be introduced by prepositions, participles, or infinitives. The introductory word determines the classification of the phrase according to form.

- A **prepositional phrase** is a phrase introduced by a preposition.<sup>2</sup>
- A **participial phrase** is a phrase introduced by a participle.<sup>3</sup>
- An **infinitive phrase** is a phrase introduced by an infinitive.<sup>4</sup>

Examples:

I am leaving in an hour.

(prepositional phrase)

The boy wearing the baseball cap is our school's team captain. (participial phrase)

<sup>1</sup> Refer to section on Parts of Speech to review what these are.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to section on Prepositions for a review on what these are.

<sup>3</sup> Refer to section on Participles for a review on what these are.

<sup>4</sup> Refer to section on Infinitives for a review on what these are.

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To be free is all I ask for.

(infinitive phrase)

### Divisions according to Use

Phrases may be used as adjectives, as adverbs, or as nouns. The function determines the classification of a phrase according to use.

- An **adjectival phrase** is a phrase used as an adjective.
- An **adverbial phrase** is a phrase used as an adverb.
- A **noun phrase** is a phrase used as a noun.

Examples:

A group of students went past.

(adjectival phrase)

I motioned to her to her with sweeping gestures.

(adverbial phrase)

She liked being admired.

(noun phrase)

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## II. Clauses

A clause is a part of the sentence containing, in itself, a subject and a predicate.<sup>5</sup>

### KINDS OF CLAUSES

#### Independent Clause

Clauses that make independent statements are called independent or coordinate clauses. The independent clause forms a complete sentence by itself. They are also referred to as principal clauses when used with subordinate clauses.

#### Subordinate Clause

Clauses that depend upon some other part of the sentence are dependent or subordinate clauses. The subordinate clause is therefore not complete without the principal clause.

Examples:

It was he who helped me get my confidence back.

IC SC

It is imperative that you keep your promise.

IC SC

### TYPES OF SUBORDINATE CLAUSES

Subordinate clauses may be used as adjectives, adverbs, or nouns; and as such are known as adjectival, adverbial, or noun clauses.

#### Adjectival Clause

An adjective clause is a subordinate clause used as an adjective. Adjectival clauses are usually introduced by relative pronouns (e.g. who, which, what, and that) or relative adverbs (e.g. when, where, and why).<sup>6</sup>

The girl who is wearing the red obi topped the UPCAT last year.

<sup>5</sup> Read the section on Sentences to know what a subject and a predicate are.

<sup>6</sup> Refer to readings on Relative Pronouns and Relative Adverbs to review what these are.

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- A **restrictive clause** is a clause that helps point out, or identifies a certain person or object, and is a necessary part of the sentence.  
He who has loved much is much loved as well.
- A **nonrestrictive clause** is a clause that merely adds to the information given in the principal clause and is not necessary to the sense of the sentence.  
He, who has loved much, is much loved as well.

### Adverbial Clause

An adverbial clause is a subordinate clause used as an adverb. Remember that adverbial clauses, just like adverbs, may modify a verb, an adverb, or an adjective. Adverbial clauses are usually introduced by conjunctive adverbs (e.g. after, until, as, when, before, where, since, and while) or subordinate conjunctions (e.g. as, that, since, because, then, so, for, than, though, if, provided, and unless).

Gregory was on his way home when the bullies assaulted him.

### Note on punctuation:

Every introductory adverbial clause may be separated by a comma. In certain adverbial clauses, a comma is necessary to make a meaning clear.

When you arrive, please get the mail. (may or may not use a comma)

After he ate too quickly, his stomach ached (comma is necessary; without the comma the reader will be confused about which *quickly* modifies: *ate* or *ached*)

### Noun Clauses

A noun clause is a subordinate clause used as a noun.

That it boggles the mind is inevitable.

A sentence that has a noun clause is a complex sentence. The entire sentence is considered the principal or independent clause; the noun clause is the subordinate clause.

That it boggles the mind is inevitable. (Principal clause)

That it boggles the mind (Subordinate clause)

### Uses of Noun Clauses

A noun clause has the same uses as nouns. It may be used as subject of a verb, object of a verb, the predicate nominative, the object of a preposition, or in apposition.

- **Noun clause used as Subject**

A noun clause may be used as the person, place or thing about which a statement is being made.

That you may see the error of your ways is my fervent wish.

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- **Noun clause used as Direct Object**

A transitive verb passes the action from a doer to a receiver. In the active voice, the doer is the subject and the receiver is the object.

I doubt that you can do it.

- **Noun clause used as Predicate Nominative**

The predicate nominative follows a linking verb and completes its meaning. In the following example, *is* is a linking verb and the underlined phrase completes the action by the verb; explains *My wish*.

My wish is that you may see the error of your ways.

- **Noun clause used as Object of Preposition**

A preposition shows the relationship between its object and some other word in the sentence.<sup>7</sup> Instead of using a noun in this case, we use a noun clause as the object being related to some other word in the sentence.

I was thinking about all that we have accomplished.

- **Noun clause used in Apposition**

An appositive is a word or a group of words that follows a noun or a pronoun and gives additional information about this noun/pronoun. In the following examples, the noun clause in both sentences is used as appositives.

My wish, that you may see the error of your ways, is heartfelt.

It is my wish that you may see the error of your ways.

**Caution:**

Do not confuse an appositive clause with an adjectival clause introduced by *that*. When *that* introduces an adjectival clause, it is a relative pronoun. When *that* introduces a noun clause, it is a conjunction.

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<sup>7</sup> Refer to section on Prepositions for more on the topic.

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### III. Sentences

#### DEFINITION

A sentence is a group of words expressing a complete thought.

I did not like her at first.

I began to see how she truly was.

I started to like her.

#### ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A SENTENCE

Every sentence has a subject and a predicate. The subject may or may not be expressed but the predicate is always expressed.

##### The Subject

The subject is that part of the sentence which names a person, a place or a thing about which a statement is made. This is, in a nutshell, *what is being discussed or spoken about in the sentence*. The subject with all its modifiers is called the *complete subject*.

Children are gifts.

Good and behaved children are gifts from God.

Come here.

(subject not expressed)

##### The Predicate

The predicate is that part of the sentence which tells us something about the subject. The predicate with all its modifiers and complements is called the *complete predicate*.

Children are gifts.

Good and behaved children are gifts from God.

#### NATURAL AND TRANSPOSED ORDER IN SENTENCES

##### Natural Order

Whenever the complete predicate follows the complete subject, a sentence is in the natural order.

*To be forgiven* is such a sweet and liberating experience.

Subject

Predicate

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**Transposed Order**

Whenever the complete predicate or part of the predicate is placed before the subject, a sentence is in the transposed order.

Up flew the birds.

Predicate Subject

Did you give her the book?  
part of the Predicate Subject the rest of the Predicate

**COMPOUND ELEMENTS OF A SENTENCE**

**Compound Subject**

If the subject of the sentence consists of more than one noun or pronoun, it is said to be a compound subject.

God's grace and love are necessary to us.

**Compound Predicate**

If the predicate consists of more than one verb, it is said to be a compound predicate.

You were weighed, measured and found wanting.

**CLASSIFICATION OF SENTENCES**

**Division according to Use**

- A **declarative sentence** is a sentence that states a fact.
- An **interrogative sentence** is a sentence that asks a question.
- An **imperative sentence** is a sentence that expresses a command.
- An **exclamatory sentence** is a sentence that expresses sudden or strong emotion.

Examples:

|  |                 |
|--|-----------------|
| The bus driver was tired from working all day. | (declarative)   |
| Will I be needed further?                      | (interrogative) |
| Get here as quick as you can.                  | (imperative)    |
| Oh, how I was looking forward to meeting you!  | (exclamatory)   |

*Notes on punctuation:*

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Declarative and imperative sentences are followed by periods. An interrogative sentence ends with a question mark. An exclamatory sentence ends with an exclamation point.

### Division according to Form

- A **simple sentence** is a sentence containing one subject and one predicate, either or both of which, may be compound.  
Mary and Joseph sheltered under a goat shed.
- A **compound sentence** is a sentence that contains two or more independent clauses.  
Mary and Joseph sheltered under a goat shed, and they stayed there until Jesus was born.

#### Notes on punctuation of compound sentences:

1. The clauses of a compound sentence connected by the simple conjunctions *and*, *but*, and *or* are generally separated by a comma.  
She was very late for her first class, but her teacher understood her reasons and let her in still.
  2. If the clauses are short and closely related, the comma may be omitted.  
The protesters surged toward the palace and the policemen were helpless.
  3. Sometimes, the clauses of a compound sentence have no connecting word. The connection is then indicated by a semicolon.  
Stephanie and Peter were married immediately; it was what they both wanted.
  4. The semicolon is also used to separate the clauses of a compound sentence connected by *nevertheless*, *moreover*, *therefore*, *however*, *thus*, *then* because these words have very little connective force. A comma is frequently used after these words.  
The doctor quickly performed emergency procedures as soon as he arrived at the scene of the accident; however, he was too late to save the victim.
- A **complex sentence** is a sentence that contains one principal clause and one or more subordinate clauses.  
The books, which were ordered last week, are finally arriving today.

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## IV. Punctuation

Punctuations help make the meaning of written statements clear.

### THE PERIOD

Use a period:

1. At the end of a declarative statement or an imperative sentence. (see above section for example)
2. After an abbreviation or initial.  
Dr. Mandy T. Gregory

### THE COMMA

Use a comma:

1. To separate words or group of words in a series.  
Please choose between coffee, tea, lemonade, or fruit juice.
2. To set off a short direct quotation and the parts of a divided quotation, unless a question mark or an exclamation point is required.  
"Please choose between coffee, tea, lemonade or fruit juice," offered the stewardess.  
"I hope they'll be comfortable," prayed the host, "and may long they like staying here."
3. To separate independent elements and words of direct address.  
Yes, I think so.  
Mother, I am sick.
4. To set off the parts of dates, addresses, or geographical names.  
June 15, 2005
5. To separate nonrestrictive phrases and clauses from the rest of the sentence.  
The youth, who are supposedly the hope of the motherland, couldn't care less.
6. After long introductory phrases and clauses and when needed to make meaning clear.  
While you were waiting at the airport entrance, I was waiting at the tarmac.
7. To set off an appositive that is not part of the name or that is not restrictive.  
It is my wish, that you may see the error of your ways.
8. To set off a parenthetical expression; that is, a word or a group of words inserted in the sentence as a comment or an exclamatory remark, and one that is not necessary to the thought of the sentence.  
The nurses, as well as the doctor, are confident about the patient's full recovery.
9. To separate the clauses of a compound sentence connected by the conjunctions *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *yet*.  
If the clauses are short and closely related, the comma may be omitted.

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### THE QUESTION MARK

Use a question mark:

1. At the end of every question.  
Are there any questions?

### QUOTATION MARKS

Use quotation marks:

1. Before and after every direct quotation and every part of a divided quotation. For quotations within a quotation, use single quotation marks.  
"Locke has described the State of Nature much as Hobbes had, but then he adds 'something different,' or so Montague believes," said the professor.
2. To enclose titles of stories, poems, magazines, newspaper articles, and works of art. The usual practice for titles of books, magazines and newspapers is *italicization*.  
"Ode to my Family"
3. Periods and commas belong inside quotations. Colons and semicolons are written after quotation marks.  
Gloria said, "I didn't reckon on your being here so early in the morning."  
"I didn't know you were coming," Gloria remarked.

### THE APOSTROPHE

Use an apostrophe:

1. To show possession.  
My sister's shoes are hard to fill.
2. With *s* to show the plural of letters, numbers, and signs.  
How many *a*'s are there in this sentence?
3. To show the omission of a letter, letters or numbers.  
The 25<sup>th</sup> of February in '95      We'll

### THE HYPHEN

Use a hyphen:

1. To divide a word at the end of a line wherever one or more syllables are carried to the next line.

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2. In compound numbers from twenty-one to ninety-nine.  
I have thirty-three baskets already.
3. To separate the parts of some compound words.  
My brother-in-law and my father-in-law are coming to visit tomorrow morning.

### THE DASH

Use a dash:

1. To indicate a sudden change of thought.  
He is still at the school—an unusual thing for him.

### CAPITAL LETTERS

Capitalize the first letter of the following:

1. The first word in a sentence.
2. The first word of every line of poetry (not very strict due to poetic license).
3. The first word of a direct quotation.
4. Proper nouns and proper adjectives.
5. Titles of honor and respect when preceding the name.
6. North, south, east, and west when they refer to sections of a country.
7. All names referring to God, the Bible, or parts of the Bible.
8. The principal words in the titles of books, plays, poems and pictures.
9. The pronoun *I* and the interjection *O*.
10. Abbreviations when capitals would be used if the words were written in full.

Do not capitalize:

1. The seasons of the year.
2. The articles *a*, *an*, *the*, conjunctions, or prepositions in titles, unless one of these is the first word.
3. The names of subjects, unless they are derived from proper nouns.
4. The words *high school*, *college*, and *university*, unless they are parts of the names of particular institutions.
5. Abbreviations for the time of day. (a.m./p.m.)

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## V. Badly Constructed Sentences

The following are common mistakes in sentence construction:

### SENTENCE FRAGMENTS

It is a basic rule in grammar that every sentence must contain at least one independent clause. A misplaced period may cut off a piece of the sentence, thereby resulting in a sentence that does not contain an independent clause. In the following example, the second sentence is a fragment due to a misplaced period.

The committee met early to discuss the barangay budget allocation. Which is a complicated matter.

#### Common Types of Sentence Fragments

- **Fragment appositive phrase**

A major social problem is the number of undesirable people coming into the state. *Professional gamblers and crooks, men who would do anything to make money.*

Corrected: A major social problem is the number of undesirable people coming into the state—professional gamblers and crooks, men who would do anything to make money.

- **Fragment prepositional phrase**

I had expected to find the laboratory neat and orderly, but actually it was very sloppy. *With instruments on every available space and pieces of electronic equipment lying around the floor.*

Corrected: I had expected to find the laboratory neat and orderly, but actually it was very sloppy. Instruments were on every available space and pieces of electronic equipment were lying around the floor.

- **Fragment dependent clause**

A group of ants is busy looking for food and ferrying them back and forth. *While another group of ants was busy protecting the colony.*

Corrected: A group of ants is busy looking for food and ferrying them back and forth, while another group of ants was busy protecting the colony.

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- **Fragment participial phrase**

I was amazed at how alive the city was. Everywhere there were vendors, hawking their unique and varied wares. Calling the attention of shoppers and nudging them in the hope that they'll be attracted enough to buy.

Corrected: I was amazed at how alive the city was. Everywhere there were vendors hawking their unique and varied wares, calling the attention of shoppers, and nudging them in the hope that they'll be attracted enough to buy.

- **Fragment Infinitive Phrase**

To get rich the best way how. That is the aim of every businessman I have met, and I doubt if I'll meet one with a different goal.

Corrected: To get rich the best way how is the aim of every businessman I have met, and I doubt if I'll meet one with a different goal.

### **Permissible Incomplete Sentences**

Certain elliptical expressions stand as sentences because their meanings are readily understood, especially in a conversation context.

1. Questions and answers to questions especially in conversations.

Why not?  
Because it's late.

2. Exclamations and requests

Yes!  
This way, please.

3. Transitions

So much for that.  
Now to go to the other issue.

There's also the case of descriptive or narrative prose where fragments are deliberately used for effect.

The clock ticked and tocked. Tick and tock. Tick and tock.

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### **RUN-TOGETHER SENTENCES**

This error is also known as the *comma splice*. This mistake is produced by a misplaced comma. Particularly, it is the use of a comma to connect two independent clauses not conjoined by coordinating conjunctions.

Give me liberty, give me death.

#### **Three Ways of Correcting Run-Together Sentences**

- Use a semicolon between the two independent clauses  
Give me liberty; give me death.
- Use a period between the clauses and make them two sentences instead.  
Give me liberty. Give me death.
- Insert a coordinating conjunction between the two clauses  
Give me liberty or give me death.

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## **VI. Common Mistakes in Sentence Construction**

### **SENTENCE UNITY**

A sentence is unified if the various ideas it contains all contribute to making one total statement and if the unifying idea, which ties the various parts together, is made clear to the reader. Faults in sentence unity include inclusion of irrelevant ideas, excessive detail, illogical coordination and faulty subordination.

#### **Irrelevant Ideas**

These are ideas that do not help and contribute to the sentence.

Shirley got into a fight and when a person gets into a fight, he or she is probably going to be agitated after and this does not contribute to overall feeling of well-being.

Problem: Who or what is the topic of the sentence, Shirley or well-being?

Problematic Statements:

A student, whether he or she goes to the University of the Philippines, a premier university in the country which is patterned after Harvard which is a premier college abroad, or any other college or university in the land, should be thankful for the educational opportunity.

Improved: A student, whether he or she goes to a premier university like the University of the Philippines or to any other college or university, should be thankful for the educational opportunity.

Meeting you has made all the difference for I have never loved nor will love any other man than you, and love means not having to say you're sorry.

Problem: This sentence is about expressing the speaker's joy in finding her true love. The definition of love in the end is very irrelevant. Leave it out or make it another sentence.

Seeming lack of unity: Radio stars have to practice hard to develop pleasant speaking voices; it is very important that they acquire a sense of timing so programs will begin and end promptly.

Improved: Radio stars have to practice hard to develop pleasant speaking voices and to improve their sense of timing so that programs will begin and end promptly.

Faulty sentence break: Hobbes believed men are naturally equal. He believed they had the same liberties and rights, and moreover he thought men in that state are miserable.

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Improved: Hobbes believed men are naturally equal, that they had the same liberties and rights. Moreover, he thought men in that state are miserable.

### Excessive Detail

If the sentence contains too many ideas, none of them will stand out and the sentence will seem overcrowded and pointless.

Overcrowded sentence: When Rizal and the rest of the *ilustrados* agitated for equal rights for the Filipinos, other Filipinos heard and took these protests as reason to go up in the mountains and fight a guerilla war with the Spaniards where they lost most of the time yet proved that they would not sit back and let foreigners take over their own country.

Improved: When Rizal and the rest of the *ilustrados* agitated for equal rights for Filipinos, other Filipinos heard. These Filipinos took the *ilustrados*' protests as a reason to go up in the mountains and fight a guerilla war with the Spaniards. They lost most of the time, indeed, but they proved that they would not sit back and let foreigners take over their own country.

Just because two ideas are related, and thus naturally follow each other; that doesn't mean they belong to one sentence.

Lack of sentence unity: I will give you a grand tour of the campus after I got my things unloaded at the desk and I hope you will enjoy it here.

Improved: I will give you a grand tour of the campus after I got my things unloaded at the desk. I hope you will enjoy it here.

## SUBORDINATION

To make main points stand out clearly, less important points must be made less conspicuous. Main ideas should be expressed in independent clauses, which are the backbone of any sentence. Minor descriptive details, qualifications, and incidental remarks should be put into subordinate constructions—dependent clauses, appositives, or modifying phrases.

### Primer sentences

A series of short independent sentences may produce the jerky primer style of elementary students. A disadvantage of such writing is that there seems to be no sentence that is more important than the rest. Primer sentences should be unified into longer sentences, with less important ideas subordinated.

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Primer Sentences:

Look at how she dances. She shows harmony and grace. She is dancing to a jazz piece. She is beautiful to watch.

I gave everything to that cause. I gave all my strength. I gave all my time. I gave all my interest. Look where it brought me.

Improved Sentences:

Look at how she dances to the jazz piece, showing such harmony and grace and is such a beauty to watch.

I gave everything—my strength, my time, and my interest—to that cause, but look where it brought me.

### Illogical Coordination

When sentence elements are joined by *and* or another coordinating conjunction, the implication is that the elements are of equal weight and importance. If that is not really the case, one of them should be subordinated.

Illogically coordinated sentences:

A large sugar plant was built allegedly to supply the whole country with its sugar needs and is now operational.

You should get and shred a piece of ribbon and a size no greater than 0.5 centimeters.

I got a free afternoon, and I thought about what I'd like to do, and I decided to clean the house, but my friend Sheila arrived, and we went to the mall instead.

Improved Sentences:

A large sugar plant, built allegedly to supply the whole country with its sugar needs, is now operational.

You should get and shred a piece or ribbon to a size no greater than 0.5 centimeters.

When I got a free afternoon, I thought about what I'd like to do and decided to clean the house. However, my friend Shiela arrived so she and I went to the mall instead.

### Faulty Subordination

When the main idea of the sentence is placed in a subordinate construction, the resulting upside-down subordination makes the sentence weak. The context, of course, determines which ideas are relatively more, and which are relatively less important.

Faulty Subordination:

I was mooning around when my classmate called my name which caused me to trip.

The movie had an opening scene which people thought was irrelevant and unnecessarily gory.

Improved sentences:

While I was mooning around, my classmate called my name and caused me to trip.

People thought the opening scene of the movie was irrelevant and unnecessarily gory.

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## PARALLELISM

Parallel thoughts should be expressed in parallel grammatical form. For example, an infinitive should be paralleled by an infinitive, not by a participle; a subordinate clause by another subordinate clause, not by a phrase. Parallel method is one way of showing readers the relation between your ideas.

### Coordinate Constructions

The coordinating conjunctions (like *and*, *or*, *but*, and *nor*) are sure signs of compound construction. Any sentence element which can be joined by a coordinating conjunction should be parallel in construction.

#### Sentences that are not parallel:

Among the responsibilities of a UP student are studying hard and to serve the country.

I would like to discuss and focusing on the issues at hand.

Every child is taught to work with the team and that good sportsmanship must be shown.

#### Sentences that are parallel:

Among the responsibilities of a UP student are studying hard and serving the country.

I would like to discuss and focus on the issues at hand.

Every child is taught to work with the team and to show good sportsmanship.

### Elements in Series

Sentence elements in series (*x*, *y*, and *z*) should express parallel ideas and be parallel in grammatical form.

#### Faulty Parallelism:

She is young, well educated, and has an aggressive manner.

I was weighed, has been measured, and was found wanting.

He was tall, dark, and wore a black coat.

#### Improved Parallelism:

She is young, well educated, and aggressive.

I was weighed, measured, and found wanting.

He was tall, dark, and black-coated. (Or, "He was tall and dark, and he wore a black coat.")

### Repetition of Prepositions and Other Introductory Words:

In order to make a parallelism clear, it is often necessary to repeat a preposition, an article, a relative pronoun, a subordinating conjunction, an auxiliary verb, or the sign of the infinitive.

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### Obscure Parallelisms:

The lady must decide who among the suitors she likes best and not waste time informing them of her decision.  
The cashier told him that his account has not been cleared yet and he must do so first before he can claim benefits.  
The area was littered by plastic bottles and candy wrappers, and the tourists who produced all the garbage.

### Clear Parallelism:

The lady must decide who among the suitors she likes best and must not waste time informing them of her decision.  
The cashier told him that his account has not been cleared yet and that he must do so first before he can claim benefits.  
The area was littered by plastic bottles and candy wrappers, and by tourists who produced all the garbage.

Note: It is not necessary to repeat the connective word when the parallel elements are short and stand close together.

### **Correlatives**

Correlative conjunctions like *either...or*, *neither...nor*, *not only...but also* should be followed by parallel sentence elements.

### Undesirables:

He is not only discourteous to the students but also to the teacher. (*Not only* is followed by an adjective with a prepositional phrase modifying it; *but also* is followed by a prepositional phrase.)  
He either was a magnificent liar or a remarkably naïve young man. (*Either* is followed by a verb and its noun complement; *or* is followed by a noun and its modifying adjectives.)

### Improved:

He is discourteous not only to the students but also to the teacher. (The correlatives are each followed by a prepositional phrase now)  
He was either a magnificent liar or a remarkably naïve young man. (Each correlative is followed by a noun complement of the verb)

### **And Which Clauses**

Avoid joining a relative clause to its principal clause by *and* or *but*. An undesirable *and which* construction can be corrected three ways:

1. by omitting the coordinating conjunction,
2. changing the relative clause to a principal clause, or
3. inserting a relative clause before the conjunction.

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Undesirables:

We were fooling around on our way to the canteen when we were shushed by the Dean and who had a disagreeable disposition.

The witness appeared at the hearing with a long written statement, but which he was not allowed to read.

Improved:

We were fooling around on our way to the canteen when we were shushed by the Dean who had a disagreeable disposition.

We were fooling around on our way to the canteen when we met the Dean who had a disagreeable disposition and who shushed us.

The witness appeared at the hearing with a long written statement, but he was not allowed to read it.

### **FAULTY REFERENCE OF PRONOUNS**

The antecedent of every pronoun should be immediately clear to the reader. Faulty reference of pronouns is particularly hard to detect in a first draft.

#### **Ambiguous Reference**

Do not use a pronoun in such away that it might refer to either of the two antecedents. Do not practice explaining the pronoun by repeating of antecedent in parentheses.

Undesirable: Dona met Michelle when she was on the way to school (To whom is *she* referring to, Dona or Michelle?)

Dona met Michelle when she (Michelle) was on the way to school.

Improved: Dona, on her way to school, met Michelle.

#### **Reference to Remote Antecedent**

A pronoun need not be in the same sentence as its antecedent, but the antecedent should not be so remote as to cause possible misreading. If a considerable amount of material stands between the antecedent and the pronoun, repeat the antecedent.

Undesirable: Cindy lacked enough money to buy the beautiful dress that was made of silk, gorgeously cut, and very expensive. Dozens of other dresses were in the store as well but they were no competition to the dream dress that she wanted.

Improved: ...but they were no competition to the dream dress that Cindy wanted.

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### Reference to Implied Antecedent

Do not use a pronoun to refer to a noun which is not expressed but has to be inferred from another noun.

*Antecedent implied:* I once knew a very old violinist who repaired them very expertly.

*Improved:* I once knew an old violinist who repaired violins very expertly.

### Reference to Inconspicuous Antecedent

Do not use a pronoun to refer to a noun in a subordinate construction where it may be overlooked by the reader. A noun that is used as an adjective is likely to be too inconspicuous to serve as an antecedent.

*Inconspicuous antecedent:* Adobe brick was used in the wall, which is a Spanish word for sun-dried clay.

*Improved:* The bricks in the wall were made of adobe, which is a Spanish word for sun-dried clay.

### Broad Reference

Using a relative or demonstrative pronoun (*which, that, this*) to refer to the whole idea of a preceding clause, phrase or sentence is acceptable if the sense and if a change would be awkward and wordy.

*Acceptable broad reference:* At first glance, the desert seems completely barren of animal life, but this is a delusion.

*Undesirable:* The battle of Thermopylae was the battle where Spartans fought the Persians and where every Spartan who fought was killed, the account of which can be found in many books.

*Improved:* The battle of Thermopylae was the battle where Spartans fought the Persians and where every Spartan who fought was killed. The account of this battle is told in many books.

*Ambiguous:* The beginning of the book is more interesting than the conclusion, which is very unfortunate.

*Improved:* Unfortunately, the beginning of the book is more interesting than the conclusion.

*Awkward:* In the eighteenth century more and more land was converted into pasture, which had been going on to some extent for several centuries.

*Improved:* In the eighteenth century, more and more land was converted into pasture, a process which had been going on to some extent for several years.

### Personal Pronouns Used Indefinitely

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Although the indefinite *you* is suitable in informal writing, it is generally out of place in formal compositions. Instead, use the impersonal pronoun *one*, or put the verb in the passive voice.

Informal: You should not take sedatives without a doctor's prescription.

Formal: One should not take sedatives without a doctor's prescription.

Formal or Informal: Sedatives should not be taken without a doctor's prescription.

The indefinite use of *they* is always vague and usually sounds childish and naïve.

Undesirable: Thirty years ago, there was no such thing as an atomic bomb; in fact, they did not even know how to split the atom.

Improved: ...in fact, scientists did not even know how to split the atom.

The indefinite *it* is correctly used in impersonal expressions (e.g. it is raining, it is hot) or in sentences where *it* anticipates the real subject (e.g. *It seems best to go at once*) Colloquial use like "It says here that..." should not be used in writing.

Undesirable: It says in the paper that they are having severe storms in the West.

Improved: The paper says there are severe storms in the West.

### Demonstrative Pronouns and Adjectives

The pronouns *this*, *that*, *these*, *those* are frequently used as adjectives, to modify nouns. Using one of these words as a modifier, without an expressed or clearly implied antecedent, is a colloquialism which should be avoided in serious writing.

Acceptable: After struggling through the poetry assignment, I decided that I would never read one of those poems again.

Colloquial: It was just one of those things.

Colloquial: The building was one of those rambling old mansions.

Improved: The building was one of those rambling old mansions that are found in every New England town.

### DANGLING MODIFIERS

A modifier is a dangling modifier when there is no word in the sentence for it to modify. In the sentence "Swimming out into the lake, the water felt cold," the writer took it for granted that the reader would assume somebody was swimming. In fact, the only noun in the sentence is *water* and the participial phrase

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*Swimming out into the lake* could not logically be modifying it; the water could not be swimming. Thus, this participial phrase is a dangling modifier.

### A Dangling modifier can be remedied in two ways:

1. By supplying the noun or pronoun that the phrase logically modifies  
Swimming out into the cold, I felt that the water was cold.
2. By changing the dangling modifier into a complete clause (one which has a subject and predicate)  
As I swam out into the lake, the water felt colder.

### Dangling Participles, Gerunds and Infinitives

Dangling participial phrase: Strolling around the park one day, a baby suddenly cried. (Who was *strolling*)

Improved: As I was strolling around the park one day, a baby suddenly cried.

Dangling Gerund Phrase: For opening the door to let her in, the beautiful lady gave me a radiant smile. (Who opened the door?)

Improved: The beautiful lady gave me a radiant smile after I had opened the door for her.

Dangling infinitive phrase: To pass the difficult entrance examination, all possible topics must be covered in the review.

Improved: To pass the difficult entrance examination, a student must cover all possible topics in the review.

### Dangling Elliptical Clauses

Subject and main verb are sometimes omitted from a dependent clause. These clauses are called elliptical clauses:

Instead of *while he was going*, *while going* is used.

Instead of *when he was a boy*, *when a boy* is used.

If the subject of the elliptical clause is not mentioned in the rest of the sentence, it may become a dangling elliptical clause.

Dangling: When six years old, my favorite pet dog died.

Improved: When I was six years old, my favorite pet dog died.

### Permissible Introductory Expressions

Some verbal phrases, like *generally speaking*, *taking all things into consideration*, *judging from past experience* have become stock introductory expressions and need not be attached to any particular noun. Similarly, verbals expressing a generalized process, like *in swimming*, *in cooking*, are often used without being attached to a particular noun.

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### Acceptable:

Generally speaking, males die younger than females.

Taking all things into consideration, the decision was just and as it should be.

Judging from past experience, UP graduates get hired much faster than others.

In swimming, relaxation is essential.

In cooking, the quality of the ingredients is important.

## MISPLACED SENTENCE ELEMENTS

The normal sentence order in English is *subject, verb, and complement*, with modifiers either before or after the word being modified. This permits certain flexibility in the placing of subordinate clauses, but the following must be observed:

1. Place modifiers as close as possible to the words they modify
2. Do not needlessly split a grammatical construction by the insertion of another sentence element.

### Misplaced clauses and phrases

Some subordinate clauses and modifying phrases can be moved around to various positions in the sentence without affecting its meaning. For example, an introductory adverbial clause can sometimes be shifted from the beginning to the middle or the end of the sentence.

*Whatever other people may say*, I still believe that faith is a matter best left to the individual's discretion.

I still believe, *whatever other people may say*, that faith is a matter best left to the individual's discretion.

I still believe that faith is a matter best left to the individual's discretion, *whatever other people may say*.

This freedom, however, has its dangers. Modifiers may be placed so as to produce ridiculous misreadings or real ambiguities.

Misplaced modifier: Like many artists of the period, Carey lost the opportunity to make large profits on his paintings through the work of imitators and plagiarists.

Corrected: Like many artists of the period, Carey lost, through the work of imitators and plagiarists, the opportunity to make large profits on his paintings.

Misplaced Modifier: The ramp model wore a grey cardigan over one shoulder which looked fuzzy and warm.

Corrected: The ramp model wore over one shoulder, a grey cardigan which looked fuzzy and warm.

### Misplaced Adverbs

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Theoretically, limiting adverbs like *only*, *almost*, *never*, *seldom*, *even*, *hardly*, *nearly* should be placed immediately before the words they modify.

Gino *only* tried to express his thanks.

Gino and I fought *only* once.

Formal: She gave you that food *only* to make up for yesterday's fiasco.

Informal: She *only* gave you that food to make up for yesterday's fiasco.

Acceptable: He *seldom* seems to smile.

Acceptable: The migratory bird *hardly* appeared to be breathing.

Awkward: What would foreigners think of us if they *only* got their impression of the Philippines from Claire Danes' maligning tongue?

Improved: What would foreigners think of us if they got their impression of the Philippines *only* from Claire Danes' maligning tongue?

Ambiguous: I *nearly* ate all of it, leaving you with nothing.

Improved: I ate *nearly* all of it, leaving you with nothing.

### Squinting Modifiers

Avoid placing a modifier in such a position that it may refer to either a preceding or a following word.

Ambiguous: The person who steals in nine cases out of ten is driven to do so by want.

Improved: In nine cases out of ten, the person who steals is driven to do so by want.

Ambiguous: Since a canoe cannot stand hard knocks when not in use it should be kept out of the water.

Improved: Since a canoe cannot stand hard knocks, it should be kept out of the water when not in use.

### Awkward Split Constructions; Split Infinitives

Any needless splitting of a grammatical construction by the insertion of a modifier may affect the meaning of the sentence.

Awkward: The author made the horses, animals that we consider *only* fit for hard and brute labor, portray an ideal society.

Improved: The author portrays an ideal society by means of horses, animals that we consider *only* fit for hard and brute labor.

Split infinitives are a result of inserting a word or a group of words between the *to* and the verb form. This may be awkward, especially if the modifier is long.

Awkward: I should like to, if the Lord blesses me with such grace, tour the world.

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Improved: I should like to tour the world, if the Lord blesses me with such grace.

In some cases, infinitives are split by adverbs. This type of split-infinitives is usually acceptable.

Acceptable: To *never* gain back my honor would be a great burden.

Acceptable: The company is hoping to *more than* double its assets next year.

### UNNECESSARY SHIFTS

Structural consistency makes a sentence easier to read. If the first clause of a sentence is in the active voice, do not shift to the passive voice in the second clause unless there is some reason for the change. Similarly, avoid needless shifts in tense, mode, or person within a sentence.

#### Shifts of Voice or Subject

Shifting from the active to the passive voice almost always involves a change in subject; thus, an unnecessary shift in voice may make a sentence doubly awkward.

Shift in subject and voice: When I finally found the trouble in an unsoldered wire, the dismantling of the motor was begun at once.

Improved: When I finally found the trouble in an unsoldered wire, I began at once to dismantle the motor.

Shift in voice: The new cellphone model is so innovative that it is wanted so badly by my friend.

Improved: The new cellphone model is so innovative that my friend wants it so badly.

Shift in subject: The children have played almost all the games there are, but games of *hide and seek* are their favorite.

Improved: The children have played almost all the games there are, but they like *hide and seek* best.

#### Shifts of Tense

Do not change the tense unless there is reason to do so.

Shift of tense: The family was usually quarreled over money matters, and when this new problem arises, the family is broken up.

Improved: The family was usually quarreled over money matters, and when this new problem arose, the family was broken up.

#### Shifts of Mode

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For example, If you begin a sentence with an imperative command (imperative mode), do not shift without reason to a statement (indicative mode).

Shift of mode: Jump to the left; then you should jump to the right. (the first clause is a command, the second clause is a statement giving advice)

Improved: Jump to the left; then jump to the right.

Improved: After jumping to the left, you should jump to the right.

Shift of mode: If I were you, I would be very grateful and I will thank him in any way I can. (Subjunctive, Indicative)

Improved: If I were you, I would be very grateful and I would thank him in any way I can.

### Shifts of Person

The most common shift in writing is from the third person to the second person. This usually happens when the writer is talking about no particular individual but of everyone in general.

Needless shift: A man must always think happy thoughts for you can will happiness.

Improved: You must always think happy thoughts for you can will happiness.

Improved: A man must always think happy thoughts for he can will happiness.

## INCOMPLETE CONSTRUCTIONS

Sentence constructions are incomplete if words and expressions necessary for clarity are omitted.

### Auxiliary Verbs

Do not omit auxiliary verbs that are necessary to complete a grammatical construction. When the two parts of a compound construction are in different tenses, it is usually necessary to write the auxiliary verbs in full.

Incomplete: Due to a vehicular accident last year, he can no longer walk and never walk again.

Improved: Due to a vehicular accident last year, he can no longer walk and will never walk again.

### Idiomatic prepositions

English idioms require that certain prepositions be used with certain adjectives: we say for example "interested *in*", "aware *of*", "devoted *to*". Be sure to always include all necessary idiomatic prepositions.

Incomplete: She is exceptionally interested and devoted to her friends.

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*Improved:* She is exceptionally interested in and devoted to her friends.

### **Comparisons As and Than; One of the...if not the...**

In comparisons, do not omit words necessary to make a complete idiomatic statement. We say “as pretty *as*” and “prettier *than*”.

*Incomplete:* Liza is as pretty, if not prettier than Lolita.

*Complete but Awkward:* Liza is as pretty as, if not prettier than Lolita.

*Improved:* Liza is as pretty as Lolita, if not prettier.

*Incomplete:* The September 11 bombing of the twin towers is one of the worst, if not the worst, terrorist attacks in the world. (two idioms: “one of the worst terrorist attacks” and the “worst terrorist attack”)

*Correct:* The September 11 bombing of the twin towers is one of the worst terrorist attacks, if not the worst terrorist attack, in the world.

### **Incomplete Comparisons**

Comparisons should be logical and unambiguous.

*Illogical:* Her energy level is lower than an old lady. (Is an old lady low?)

*Improved:* Her energy level is lower than that of an old lady.

*Improved:* Her energy level is lower than an old lady's.

Avoid comparisons which are ambiguous or vague because they are incomplete. A comparison is ambiguous if it is too hard to tell what is being compared with what. It is vague if the standard of comparison is not stated.

*Ambiguous Comparison:* Alabang is farther from Sucat than Makati.

*Clear:* Alabang is farther from Sucat than Makati is.

*Vague comparison:* The people have finally realized that it's cheaper to commute.

*More Definite:* The people have finally realized that it's cheaper to commute than to drive.

If it is clearly indicated by the context, the standard of comparison need not be specified.

*Acceptable:* You are big, but I am bigger.

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## MIXED CONSTRUCTIONS

Do not begin a sentence with one construction and shift to another to conclude the sentence. English is full of alternate constructions and it is easy to confuse them. For example, here are two ways of saying the same thing:

1. Fishing in Alaska is superior to that of any other region in North America.
2. Alaska is superior to any other region in North America for lake and stream fishing.

The first sentence compares fishing in two regions; the second compares two regions in regard to fishing. Either sentence is correct, but the combination of the first half of one with the second half of the other produces confusion.

*Mixed Construction:* Fishing in Alaska is superior to that of any other region in North America for lake and stream fishing.

*Mixed construction:* Often it wouldn't be late in the evening before my father got home.

*Correct:* Often it would be late in the evening before my father got home.

*Correct:* Often my father wouldn't get home until late in the evening.

Many mixed constructions involve comparisons. For example:

*Mixed Construction:* The backyard mechanic will find plastic much easier to work with than with metal.

*Correct:* The backyard mechanic will find plastic easier to work with than metal.

*Correct:* The backyard mechanic will find it easier to work with plastic than with metal.

Using a modifying phrase or clause as subject or complement of a verb often produces a badly mixed construction.

*Mixed Construction:* Without a top gave the new car model a very odd look.

*Correct:* Without a top, the new car model looked very odd.

*Mixed Construction:* Only one thing stops me from hurting you—because you're my sister. (*the only thing* requires a substantive at the end, not *because...*)

*Correct:* Only one thing stops me from hurting you—the thought that you're my sister.

The “reason...is because” construction is still not accepted in formal English.

*Mixed construction:* The reason UP graduates perform so well in the job market is because employers think that UP graduates are competent.

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*Correct:* UP graduates perform well in the job market because employers think UP graduates are competent.

### WEAK AND UNEMPHATIC SENTENCES

Even though the sentence is technically correct, with its elements properly subordinated to throw the stress on the most important ideas, it may still lack force and impact. Weak sentences are usually caused either by shaky structure or by dilution with needless words and repetitions.

#### Trailing Constructions

A sentence should not trail away in a tangle of dependent clauses and subordinate elements. The end of a sentence is an emphatic position. Put some important idea there. However, it is not necessary to make all your sentences “periodic” – that is, arranged so that the meaning is suspended until the very end of the sentence. Periodic sentences may sound contrived and formal:

It was Swift's intention that mankind, despite its ability to deceive itself, should be forced to look steadily and without self-excuse at the inherent evil of human nature.

Although such sentences are compact and forceful, too many of them makes one's writing sound stilted. On the other hand, the following sentence is inexcusably weak:

A trip abroad would give me a knowledge of foreign lands, thus making me a better citizen than when I left, because I could better understand our foreign policy.

The participial construction “thus making me a better citizen” is especially weak. Not only is it technically “dangling”, but it seems like an afterthought, like it was just an add-on to the sentence. Rearrangement and trimming could make it a better sentence:

The knowledge gained on a trip abroad would help me to understand our foreign policy and thus make me a better citizen.

*Trailing Construction:* It is in this scene that Leo finally realizes that he has been deceived by the promises of his sisters.

*Improved:* In this scene Leo finally realizes that he has been deceived by the promises of his sisters.

#### Avoiding Anticlimax

When a sentence ends in a series of words varying in strength, they should be placed in climactic order, the strongest last, unless the writer intends to make an anticlimax for a humorous effect.

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Anticlimactic: The new sales manager proved himself to be mercilessly cruel in discharging incompetents, stubborn and impolite.

Improved: The new sales manager proved himself to be impolite, stubborn, and mercilessly cruel in discharging incompetents.

Catchall phrases like *and others, etc, and the like* suggest that the writer has run out of examples. Do not use them unless there's a good reason.

Weak: Some cities in the Philippines like Quezon City, Manila, and the like, have populations that range over a million.

Improved: Some cities in the Philippines, like Quezon City and Manila, have populations that range over a million.

Sentences ending with prepositions are by no means incorrect. A sentence with a preposition at the end is often more emphatic, and more natural, than a sentence that has a preposition buried within it.

Stilted: This is the picture of the girl with whom I am in love.

Improved: This is the picture of the girl I am in love with.

### WORDY SENTENCES

Unnecessary words and repetitions dilute the strength of a piece of writing. Be as concise as clarity and fullness of statement permit. Note that conciseness is not the same as brevity. A brief statement does not give detail; for example:

"I failed."

A concise statement may give a good detail but it does not waste words:

"Last month, I did not reach my sales quota."

Being brief is not always a virtue. But it is always good to be concise. In revision, look for unnecessary words in your sentences. Look with suspicion at such circumlocutions as "along the lines of", "of the nature of." Avoid redundant expressions like "green in color", "in the contemporary world of today", "petite in size."

Wordy and repetitious: If I should be required to serve a term with the armed forces, I would prefer to enter the Air Force, because I think I would like it better than any other branch of the service, as I have always had a strong interest in and liking for airplanes.

Improved: If I have to enter the armed forces, I would prefer the Air Force, as I have always liked airplanes.

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Wordy: I am happy to announce that I grant your request.

Improved: Yes.

### VAGUE SENTENCES

If your sentences are to be clear, you must express your meaning fully, in exact and definite language.

#### Gaps in Thought

Try to put yourself in the place of your reader and try to read your sentence through his eyes. Would it be clear to someone without prior knowledge of what you are trying to say? It may be that because you wrote it and you know what you are trying to say, you jump ahead and “short circuit” your sentence.

Not clear: Maturing faster because of parents' divorcing does not hold true in all cases. The child may be rendered timid and insecure.

Gaps filled in: When his parents are divorced, the shock may hasten the maturation of the child. But this does not always happen; divorce may also retard maturation and make the child timid and insecure.

#### Inexact Statement

Be exact in writing sentences. Make your meaning clear through exact phrasing.

Inexact phrasing: Luxurious living results in expensive bills at the end of the month. (bills are not expensive; luxurious living is)

Improved: Luxurious living brings high bills at the end of the month.

Inexact phrasing: From my home are five high schools within a five-minute driving radius from my home. (one can reach the school in an automobile but not in a radius)

Improved: Five high schools lie within a five-minute driving radius of my home.

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