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## Crafting Clear, Correct Sentences

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

*Concordia University School of Law*, [tfordyce@cu-portland.edu](mailto:tfordyce@cu-portland.edu)

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# Crafting Clear, Correct Sentences

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

**E**ver stared at a sentence as you were editing, knowing it just wasn't right but not knowing quite how to fix it? This column is for you, then. Today we are going to talk about fixes for some common sentence faults. We writers tend to make fairly predictable errors, so learning a few simple fixes can greatly improve our sentences.

Here are six faults you can eliminate to fix your sentences: Redundancy, Repetition, Subject-Verb Separation, Misplaced Modifiers, Dangling Participles, and Unparallel Phrasings.

## Redundancy

Redundant writing uses unnecessary words.

*The litigant made the same identical argument below.*

*Jack and Jill both frequented Starbucks on a regular basis.*

*Same* and *identical* provide the reader with the same (or identical) information. Likewise, *frequent* and *on a regular basis* both let the reader know that (both) Jack and Jill go to Starbucks often.

Redundancies in writing can crop up when we don't pay attention to our work or because some redundancies are common place.



How often have you heard about an *absolute necessity* or created *future plans*? Do you think that companies *merge together*? Does reading these redundancies make you *pause for a moment*?

As you edit your work, be on the look out for these types of phrases.<sup>1</sup>



Then, simply choose one of the options to leave in your sentence. Your writing won't lose any meaning, and your reader won't pause.

## Repetition

Certain types of repetition can work well in writing. For instance, anaphora (or beginning sentences with the same words) can add eloquence to your writing. Needless repetition, however, can damage an otherwise fine idea.

*Only parties who have signed the settlement agreement are bound by the settlement agreement, and only two of the parties have signed the settlement agreement.*

This sentence could be fixed with the addition of a few pronouns.

*Only parties who have signed the settlement agreement are bound by it, and only two of the parties have signed it.*

Likewise, repeating the same root close together can cripple a sentence.

*The legislative services office serves the role of answering legislators' questions about the impact of proposed legislation.*

The repetition of the roots *legislate* and *serve* creates an awkward

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sentence. Using synonyms in these instances helps.

*The legislative services office answers lawmakers' questions about the impact of proposed bills.*

So, look for unnecessary repetition and choose a more concise version of the word or phrase.

## Subject-verb separation

Subjects and verbs form the core of a sentence. Too much space between them leaves the reader grasping

ing for the meaning of the sentence. The reader might also ignore the words in between the subject and verb as she waits to finally make sense of the basic action in the sentence.

*Plans unveiled last year in Boise for a streetcar to connect the east and west ends of downtown, provide free transportation through the downtown corridor, and connect to the already existing bus system between Ada and Canyon counties have been updated.*

Revising sentences like this to put the subject and verb close together helps tighten the sentence. It also allows the reader to focus her attention on the meaning of the sentence.

*Officials updated plans for a Boise streetcar that would connect the east and west ends of downtown, provide transportation through the downtown corridor, and connect to the already existing bus system between Ada and Canyon counties.*

This type of revision takes some time, but clarity in the new sentence makes your taking the time worth the effort.

### Misplaced modifiers

Modifiers can come in many places in a sentence, but oddly placed modifiers can create misreadings.

*He described the suspect as a short man with a mustache weighing about two hundred pounds.*

Wow, that is one heavy mustache! *Plaintiff alleges the hotel discriminated against him because he is disabled in violation of the ADA.*

Last I checked, the ADA did not prohibit disabilities.

The solution is to put the modifier next to what it is modifying.

*He described the suspect as a short man weighing about two hundred pounds and with a mustache.*

*Plaintiff alleges the hotel violated the ADA by discriminating against him because he is disabled.*

### Dangling participles

A participle dangles when the sentence has a participle phrase but no proper subject in sight. Okay, let's unpack that bit of grammar. For this discussion, a participle is a verb in present tense that is used like an adjective: to modify nouns.

*The officers followed the speeding car.*

The participle can become part of a participle phrase and modify the subject of a sentence.

*Following the car, the officers turned on their flashing lights.*

*Following the car* modifies *the officers*. But sometimes the participle simply suggests an actor that isn't named in the sentence. This is a dangling participle.

*Even construing every possible factual inference in plaintiff's favor, plaintiff has failed to create a genuine issue of material fact sufficient to survive summary judgment.*

The subject in this sentence is *plaintiff* but logically the plaintiff couldn't be construing her own factual inference. Instead, this participle phrase suggests an actor that isn't mentioned in the sentence: the court. To fix dangling participles, revise the sentence to make the suggested actor the subject of the independent clause.

*Even if the court construes every possible factual inference in plaintiff's favor, plaintiff has failed to create a genuine issue of material fact sufficient to survive summary judgment.*

### Unparallel phrasings

Finally, readers crave order and balance. Sentences that lack the rhythm created by parallel structure jar the reader.

*The driver drove down the middle of the road, ran a red light, and two stop signs.*

The unparallel phrasing in this sentence makes it awkward and hard to read. Express parallel ideas and lists in parallel form. Noun + Noun + Noun or Verb + Verb + Verb or Adjective + Adjective + Adjective. This helps the reader see how the ideas in a sentence relate to each other.

*The driver drove down the middle of the road, ran a red light, and went through two stop signs.*

The parallel use of verbs makes the sentence not awkward at all.

### Conclusion

See, a few quick fixes can help your ideas shine through; even if, like me, you tend to draft with some faulty constructions.

### Sources

- Bryan A. Garner, *Garner's Modern American Usage*, 701 (3d. ed. Oxford University Press 2009).
- Diana Hacker, *A Writer's Reference*, 63, 71 (3d ed. St. Martin's Press 1995).
- Mignon Fogarty, *Dangling Participles*, <http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/dangling-participles> (accessed September 13, 2013).

### Endnotes

1. Garner's *Modern American Usage* has a handy list of common redundant phrases. Bryan A. Garner, *Garner's Modern American Usage* 607, 701, 761 (3d. ed. Oxford University Press 2009).

### About the Author

**Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff** is an Assistant Professor of Law and the Director of the Legal Research and Writing Program at Concordia University School of Law in Boise. She is also Of Counsel at Rainey Law Office, a boutique firm focusing on civil appeals. You can reach her at [tfordyce@cu-portland.edu](mailto:tfordyce@cu-portland.edu) or [tfr@raineylawoffice.com](http://raineylawoffice.com).