

Lecture 12: Grammar II: Structure, Punctuation (“Pause and Effect”)

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Lynne Truss’s *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*.

In the previous lecture, we discussed the power of grammar to clarify logical relationships and then discussed in detail the problems caused by the subject-object distinction. In this lecture, I want to examine some additional grammatical problems and their solutions, focusing on problems that can reduce the effectiveness of rhetoric either by communicating the idea that the speaker is uncultured (even when this is untrue) or by confusing a hearer or reader. We will then move on to punctuation, which may sound trivial, but which is in fact an immensely powerful tool for writers and speakers.

The Split Infinitive

Many people worry about split infinitives, a few obnoxious people correct others for using split infinitives, and very few people know why we supposedly should not split infinitives.

An infinitive is the form of the verb that is written as “to ___”: to go, to run, to fish, to hide. It is called infinitive because it is equally valid for the past, present, and future: I liked to fish, I like to fish, and I will like to fish. In Latin, the infinitive is only one word; there is no “to” particle: “*currere*,” to run; “*vincere*,” to conquer. Now at some point in the nineteenth century, some prescriptive grammarians decided that because the Latin infinitive and the English infinitive were analogous, they should be treated the same way, and because you cannot split “*vincere*” into “*vinc*” and “*ere*” and then place other words between them, you cannot put any other words between the “to” and the verb in the English infinitive, even though doing so *is completely natural for English*. So for a century or two teachers have been forcing people to avoid putting an adverb there because that would “split” the infinitive. Thus “To boldly go where no man has gone before” is grammatically incorrect. This is in fact a very silly rule, because following it does not improve reader comprehension: It is merely a tedious convention. However, there are in this world certain people who have internalized this arbitrary and basically idiotic rule and thus think that a speaker or writer is ignorant if he or she splits infinitives, and so, because you may need to convince those people, you should split infinitives with caution, if at all.

Dangling Participles

Dangling participles are actually much more serious than split infinitives (though the two errors are often lumped together) because dangling participles really do interfere with comprehension. A participle is a verb used as an adjective. Take the verb “to ache” and add “ing” = aching. That describes something, so it is used as an adjective: “Professor Drout’s *aching* back kept

him up nights.” The “ing” form is called a “present participle” because it is in the present tense. You can also add an “ed” instead of an “ing” to get the past tense: “Professor Drout’s *tired* eyes made it hard for him to read.” Again, the verb is being used as an adjective.

Participles are not usually any trouble when they are by themselves. We treat them as adjectives and move on: a shining light, a broken toy. But when they are part of phrases, the trouble begins.

Running down the alleyway, the garbage can tripped Alison.

Did you picture a little garbage can with feet, running down the alley? Is that what the author meant? What went wrong?

“Running” is a participle (the “running water”; it is also a gerund, but we will set that aside for now), and “running down the alleyway” is a participial phrase. Since it is a participle, a verb acting like an adjective, it modifies a noun or a pronoun. We readers assume that the next noun we encounter is going to be the one modified, so when we reach “garbage can,” we naturally assume that this is the noun being modified by the participial phrase. And grammatically it is, although the author did not intend this. The phrase is in fact describing “Alison,” and so it needs to come just before Alison, or the entire sentence needs to be reorganized. This is how a participle “dangles” at the front of the sentence, referring to some noun or pronoun from which it is separated.

Dangling participles (and their cousins, dangling modifiers, which are often adverb phrases rather than participial phrases) often appear in writing and speaking when an author is distracted. The key element in the sentence I gave above, and the one that I wanted to communicate, was that the main person in the sentence was running down the alleyway, so I said that first. Then, because I was past the point where I could use the word “while,” and I was trying to avoid passive voice, I was stuck with the dangling participle.

Dangling participles in impromptu speech, when you recognize them, are a good excuse to stop and laugh at yourself a little. In written communication you want to rearrange the sentences so that the modifier is next to what it modifies:

While *she* was running down the alleyway, the garbage can tripped her.

Passive Voice

Active voice is the default mode for most speech: “Joe dropped the glass.” “The dog ate the homework.” But English allows us to recast those sentences in “passive voice,” in which the subject, the “doer” for the sentence, gets deleted: “The glass was dropped,” “The homework was eaten.” The object (that which receives the action) gets moved to the front of the sentence and becomes the subject. Then the verb is given a “helping” (technically an auxiliary) verb. So “glass” moves from object to subject and “dropped” picks up a helpful “was.”

Using passive voice, like starting sentences with a conjunction or ending sentences with a preposition (both of these are in fact acceptable), is one of those things that is often beaten out of us in high school and even in college. Passive voice is usually considered to be poor writing and poor rhetoric because it tricks you into leaving out information. Who dropped the glass?

Who ate the homework? This is seen, often quite rightly, as a flaw. Passive voice leads to confusion, and a confused reader is not a convinced reader.

Passive voice, however, is not always bad and can be rhetorically effective. What if you *want* to leave out information? Then passive voice is your friend. “Mistakes were made,” you say, when challenged about the collapse of the multibillion dollar corporation you were running. Why not say “I made mistakes”? Well, it makes you a lawsuit target (you have just “admitted” to making mistakes), whereas if you just say “mistakes were made,” you end up looking as if you’ve admitted something without actually doing any admitting. “I made a mistake” is a performative utterance, with all of the difficulties that go with it. “Mistakes were made” is not performative. As an analyst of rhetoric, look out for passive voice. And as a creator of rhetoric, use it responsibly.

Almost all of the grammatical elements we have discussed thus far are in the realm of syntax, the order of words. And I want to end with one more before moving on. Many of us had drummed into our heads that you cannot start a sentence with “and” or “but.” There is a reason behind this rule: Children, when learning to write, use words like “and” and “but” to help them string together ideas. Teachers, attempting to force students to use more complex sentences, forbid us from starting a sentence with a conjunction. But because we are no longer in first grade, we can use conjunctions to start sentences when we want to create specific effects. In fact, you not only can but *should* use “because” to start sentences because this word encourages you to explain things more clearly to your audience, and more clear explanations will in turn be more likely to bring about agreement.

Punctuation, or “Pause and Effect”

People often incorrectly think of punctuation as a series of mistakes not to be made rather than as an incredibly useful tool for helping to get a point across. But punctuation is not merely something to fear. It is in fact an art about which most readers and writers already know quite a bit. I’ve stolen the title of this section, “Pause and Effect,” from a book about medieval punctuation because, believe it or not, punctuation really was invented in the Middle Ages. In the Middle Ages, scribes began to realize that they could make their texts more legible, and the readings more consistent, if they could indicate the places people were supposed to pause. This probably has a fair bit to do with the problems of learning Latin in the Church: We have evidence that a surprisingly large number of priests could not actually understand the Latin they were reading and were instead working through the text phonetically, so knowing when to pause did not arise from the sense of the material. These readers were probably very happy to have scribes indicate when to pause and when not to in order to recite the material correctly.

Punctuation simply tells readers where to pause. A comma is a one-count pause, a period is a two-count pause, a semicolon is one-and-a-half and a colon is just shy of two, maybe one-and-three-quarters. An apostrophe marks something that has been deleted. Dashes add emphasis to an aside; parentheses mark the aside as less significant. Of course there is much more, and it is useful to read a book like Lynne Truss’s *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* to see many more of the subtleties of punctuation, but I have just given you the most important rules in a single paragraph.

You can use the pause rule and be right most of the time. However, it is very important to recognize that the pause you are recording is the pause you want the reader to make, not the pause *you* made when you were thinking of what to write. Punctuation, like most rhetoric, is at its foundation about fulfilling the reader's needs, not the writer's thought processes. You have to give your audience what they need.

In general, you will be much better off if you read a questionable sentence out loud, but let us look for just a moment at the most common mistakes and how to avoid them. The single most common mistake in punctuation is not about a pause, but concerns the apostrophe: The word *it's* only *ever* means "it is." It would make sense that "belonging to it" would be marked with a possessive apostrophe, but it is not, and the reason is linguistically interesting (and may help you to remember the rule). Recall that an apostrophe indicates that a letter has been removed, so what has been removed from a possessive? Back in Old and Middle English, a possessive singular was made by adding "es" to a word. Dog → Doges. When we stopped *saying* doges, and instead started saying "dogz," we used the apostrophe to mark the missing "e" (the same way we use an apostrophe in "don't" to mark the missing o). However, the plural for *it* was never "ites," so there was no "e" to delete and thus no reason to mark it with an apostrophe. Likewise, an apostrophe is never used simply to make a plural. Never.

If there is one punctuation mark that most people worry about, it is the semicolon. And because they do not want to use something of which they are unsure, people avoid the semicolon. But semicolons are your friends. Use them correctly, and people will think you are smart. And although there are a great many rules about the semicolon, they can, for the most part, be reduced to a very simple equation:

$$, + \text{and} = ;$$

A semicolon equals a comma plus an *and*. A longer form would be "a semicolon equals a comma plus a coordinating conjunction like and, but, or, for, yet," but 90 percent of the time you are going to use *and*.

This equation needs to be linked with one other rule. If you have two grammatically complete sentences next to each other, and you want to link them, the pause that a comma gives is not enough to stick them together—in your hearer's or reader's perceptions—it will sound like just one long, confusing sentence. Likewise, just an "and" does not communicate the required pause to indicate the linkage of two separate, grammatically complete sentences. So if you have two complete sentences, you either use a comma plus "and" or a semicolon to link them. The point here is that the semicolon and colon give you more variation in pause length, and thus your reader or hearer can be charmed by your fluency and, more importantly, can be sure to understand exactly what you are saying. Semicolons are subtle, but subtle pauses and other clever, almost subliminal effects, are what really effective speakers and writers do all the time. In the next lecture, we will look at some of those subtleties in word choice and speech style.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What is the reason teachers have instructed students to not “split” infinitives?
2. What is the correct punctuation mark used between two grammatically complete sentences that are contained within another sentence?

Suggested Reading

Truss, Lynne. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*. New York: Gotham, 2004.

Other Books of Interest

Parkes, M.B. *Pause and Effect: Punctuation in the West*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Shertzer, Margaret. *The Elements of Grammar*. London: Longman, 1996.