

ENGLISH AS A FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGE PART 6: AVOIDING GRAMMAR TRAPS

Last month, we described how to achieve a safe, simple, yet attractive style by honoring Reimolds' Law #1: *Never make the reader read anything twice!* As you'll see this time, the same law can also save you from the most common grammar errors plaguing both native and nonnative English writers, namely, number disagreement, nonparallel constructions, and comma mistakes.

MAKE THE VERB AGREE WITH ITS SUBJECT

When do readers stop and reread a sentence? Generally, when things do not fit or agree, or when boundaries between clauses are unclear. Number disagreement is the prime example of the first problem.

Here is a case: *Detailed examination of the components in each layer show several differences.* The correct verb form is the singular *shows*, to go along with the singular subject *examination*.

Avoiding this trap is very simple: instead of letting the reader stumble and read twice, *you* do the rereading! Check each verb – especially if several nouns precede it. Where is the subject (the noun that does the thing expressed by the verb)? Is it singular or plural? Then make the verb agree in number. In the example, there are three nouns before the verb: *layer*, *components*, and *examination*. The writer made the verb agree with the second, plural noun, *components*, rather than with the singular subject, *examination*.

MAKE COORDINATE CONSTRUCTIONS PARALLEL

Nonparallel constructions are another common example of things not fitting. Readers expect phrases or clauses joined by coordinating words such as *and*, *or*, *either ... or*, *but*, and even *then* to follow the same pattern.

Here is a sentence that disappoints that expectation: *The samples were prepared by spraying a diluted coating on the surface, then dried in a high-velocity air stream.* When reaching the word *dried*, the reader is likely to pause because something seems off balance. Did the writer really mean that the samples were first prepared and then dried? Or did he mean that the preparation involved two steps: 1) spraying on the coating and 2) drying the coated sample? The second meaning is the more likely one – but it's not the one expressed by the sentence.

Again, the remedy is simple: don't just rely on your spell checker, but proofread each sentence. Whenever you see one of the "danger words" *and*, *or*, *either ... or*, *as well as*, *but*, or *then*, check the phrases or clauses connected by them. Do they have the same form (e.g., adjective, noun, adverb, verb in the present tense, present or past participle)? If not, fix them so they are parallel.

MAKE CLAUSE BOUNDARIES CLEAR

Consider this sentence: *As soon as the computer started humming my favorite song came on the radio.* Many readers will believe that the computer was humming a song – until they see the word *came*, which ruins that interpretation and forces them to reread the sentence.

The problem here is simply the missing comma after *humming*, to mark the end of the subordinate clause. Today's fashion seems to be to treat such clause-separating commas as optional. Grammarians don't agree – and they're right, because these commas forestall confusion.

The clause-separating comma is especially valuable before "and" followed by a complete clause, to distinguish it from a *phrase-joining* "and." Here is an example from *The New York*

Times (July 5, 1998, p.A-1): *At the World Cup, Germany played a man short for most of its shocking 3-0 loss to Croatia and the Netherlands scored after an ejection to beat Argentina, 2-1.* Because of the missing comma after "Croatia," quite a few people (including us) misread this at first as meaning that Germany lost against both Croatia and the Netherlands – even though everybody knows that a soccer team never plays against two teams in the same game! Evidently, when there is no comma before "and," readers try the *phrasal* interpretation (noun + noun) first.

Of course, commas are not strong enough to separate independent *sentences*. That's the job of the period or semicolon. For instance, in the following "run-on sentence," the comma before *however* should be replaced by semicolon or period, or the reader may initially take *however* to belong to the first sentence: *A 2 GB hard drive is sufficient for our needs, however, in the long run, a 4 GB drive may be the safer choice.*

Next time, we'll look at a strategy for overcoming spelling problems.

TO AVOID ERRORS AND CONFUSION, CHECK YOUR VERBS, COORDINATE CONSTRUCTIONS, AND CLAUSE BOUNDARIES.

Cheryl and Peter Reimold have taught communication skills to engineers, scientists, and business people for 15 years. Their firm, PERC Communications (6A Dickel Road, Scarsdale, NY 10583, telephone +1 914 725-1024), offers businesses customized in-house courses on writing, presentation skills, and on-the-job communication skills.