

Writing Protocols for Columbia Evangelical Seminary

Punctuation, Grammar, and Academic Style

Lecture # 4 Grammatical Odds and Ends

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Two texts required for this class:

1. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 6th edition, by Kate L. Turabian.
2. *Working With Words: A Handbook for Media Writers and Editors*, 5th edition, by Brian S. Brooks, James L. Pinson, Jean Gaddy Wilson.

Introduction

In this lecture, we will deal with a few grammatical odds and ends that all students (and all writers) should be aware of. (Yes, I know I ended that last sentence with a preposition.)

The Danglers

Participial Phrases as Dangers

Remember a participle is a *verbal adjective*. Participles are words that combine characteristics of verbs with those of adjectives.

Example: “The *flying* squirrel is brown.” Your first thought may be that *flying* is a verb. However, in this phrase, *flying* describes (modifies) squirrel. So it acts as an adjective (a verbal adjective) which is called a participle.

When a sentence begins with a participial phrase, the understood subject of the participle must be the same as the subject of the sentence.

Examples:

Incorrect—*Working* hard all night, *the job* became tiresome for the boy.

Correct—*Working* hard all night, *the boy* became tired.

The job was not “working hard all night.” It is the boy who was working hard all night. So, be sure to start the second clause with the same (implied) subject as is in the participial phrase.

The same is true of a sentence that begins with a past participle.

Example: *Having worked* hard all night, *the boy* became quite tired.

Learning With Humor

I’ve found that people often understand the issue of dangling modifiers better if they can see some of them that are funny. Here are a few. A real email I once got from a woman complaining about her internet connection:

“I keep getting knocked off line, while I sit and work for no apparent reason.”

Some other Funny Examples culled from the web:

At the beginning of the novel, Tom Joad comes across a turtle on his way home from spending four years in prison.

Kicking and screaming, the dentist pulled the girl's tooth.

He struck the goldfish bowl with his head, which fortunately was empty.

The clerk sold the picture to the tall lady in the golden frame.

Elizabeth Taylor appeared at the gala with her latest boyfriend dazzling in a sequined gown.

The family lawyer will read the will tomorrow at the residence of Mr. Hannon, who died June 19 to accommodate his relatives.

The burglar was about 30 years old, white, 5' 10", with wavy hair weighing about 150 pounds.

Hunting can also be dangerous, as in the case of pygmies hunting elephants armed only with spears.

We spent most of our time sitting on the back porch watching the cows playing Scrabble and reading.

Organ donations from the living reached a record high last year, outnumbering donors who are dead for the first time.

Gerund Phrases as Danglers

Remember a gerund is a *verbal noun*. Gerunds end in “ing” and function as nouns. For example: “Everyone liked Mike’s *singing*.” Notice that *singing* in this sentence is not the verb; liked is the verb. *Singing* is acting as a noun (it is a verbal noun, i.e., a gerund).

When a sentence begins with a gerund phrase, the understood subject of the gerund must be the same as the subject of the sentence.

Incorrect—*Preaching* might satisfy *the desire* for public speaking that you have.

Correct—*Preaching* might satisfy *your* desire for public speaking.

The desire is not the one doing the preaching. The implied subject of the gerund must be the first subject following the gerund phrase.

Infinitive Phrases as Danglers

Remember an infinitive is a “to verb.” The infinitive is the combination of the word “to” with any verb stem.

Examples: *to run, to jump, to eat, to talk, to swim.*

When a sentence begins with an infinitive phrase, the understood (or implied) subject of the infinitive must be the same as the subject of the sentence.

Incorrect—*To run fast, shoes must be light.* (Your shoes aren’t running; *you* are.)

Correct—*To run fast, you must wear light shoes.*

Dependent Clauses as Danglers

Remember a dependent clause typically cannot stand alone. It is *not* a complete thought.

When a sentence begins with a dependent clause, the understood (or implied) subject of the dependent clause must be the same as the subject of the sentence.

Incorrect—After reading Bob’s book, his argument was still not convincing.

Correct—After reading Bob’s book, I was still not convinced by his argument.

“His argument” did not read the book. *I* read the book.

Subject—Verb Agreement

A. Plural subjects take plural verbs. “The computers are here.” computers and are are both plural.

B. Compound subjects take plural verbs. “The computer and desk are here.”

C. Words which are connected to the subject by such phrases as “accompanied by,” “together with,” “along with,” “as well as” do not change number. “*The computer along with the desk is here.*” Notice: The computer is here.

D. When two or more subjects are connected by “or” or “nor,” they take a single verb.

Incorrect—*Neither the computer nor the desk are here.*

Correct—*Neither the computer nor the desk is here.*

Incorrect—*Are either the computer or the desk here?*

Correct—*Is either the computer or the desk here?*

E. When sentences begin with the expletives¹ “here” or “there,” they get their number from the number of what follows the verb.

Examples: *There is one computer.* *There are four computers in the room.*

F. Collective nouns can be singular or plural. Our school is governed by a Board. Is Board singular or plural? Should I say, “The Board are having their meeting” or should I say, “The Board is having its meeting”? Both are correct. Pick one and be consistent. The same is true of other collective nouns like faculty and staff.

G. Remember that words such as each, neither, either, someone, somebody, anyone, anybody, everyone, everybody, no one, and one, are always singular.²

Examples:

Incorrect—Everyone is doing their thing.

Correct—Everyone is doing his (or her) thing.

¹Expletive. A word or phrase that does not contribute any meaning but is added only to fill out a sentence or a metrical line. A word that stands in place of and anticipates a following word or phrase. In the sentence “There are many books on the table,” the word there functions as an expletive.

²Too often people argue that word “none” is always singular; however, “none” can be singular or plural depending on the sentence.

Parallel Structure and Consistency

Good writing uses parallel structure to balance two or more similar words, phrases, or clauses. Good writing is also consistent. Each sentence and each paragraph in (the final draft of) your work should move smoothly without confusing shifts in tense, number, or person. It is imperative to be familiar with parallelism and consistency.

However, even the best writers know that their first draft is only that, a draft. Good writers are re-writers. So, write your first draft, and then go back and revise it looking for any problems with parallelism and consistency, and rewrite accordingly.

Parallel Structure

Your constructions should show parallel thoughts in a parallel fashion.

Example of wrong:

“We had a good time hunting, fishing, and we hiked up mountains.” This is not parallel structure. It is the mixing of two gerunds with a verb.

hunting → note “ing” (hunting is a gerund)

fishing → note “ing” (fishing is a gerund)

hiked → note “ed” (hiked is a verb)

We have: gerund - gerund - verb

We want: gerund - gerund - gerund (To make it parallel)

Example of right:

“We had a good time hunting, fishing, and hiking.”

hunting → note “ing” (hunting is a gerund)

fishing → note “ing” (fishing is a gerund)

hiking → note “ing” (hiking is a gerund)

Now we have: *gerund - gerund - gerund* (parallelism)

Example of wrong:

“The pastor was funny, bright, and he spoke well.” This is the mixing of two adjectives with a verb.

funny —> adjective

bright —> adjective

spoke —> verb

We have: adjective - adjective - verb

We want: adjective - adjective - adjective (To make it parallel)

Example of right:

“*The pastor was funny, bright, and articulate.*”

funny —> adjective

bright —> adjective

articulate —> adjective

Now we have: *adjective - adjective - adjective* (parallelism)

Example of wrong:

The Bible is God’s Word, the Christian’s nourishment, and it gives answers to the doubters.

word —> noun

nourishment —> noun

gives —> verb

We have: noun - noun - verb

We want: noun - noun - noun (To make it parallel)

Example of right:

Can you come up with a parallel construction for this one?

The Bible is God’s Word, the Christian’s nourishment, and _____.”

Consistent Voice of the Verb

Wrong: “The *boy ran* out of the house and *was taken* to the hospital.”

Here we shifted from active to passive voice.

Correct: “The *boy ran* out of the house, and the *ambulance took* him to the hospital.”

Wrong: “The *wife took* the car, but it was *bought by* the husband.”

Here, again, we shifted from active to passive voice.

Correct: “The *wife took* the car, which her *husband had bought*.”

Wrong: “Knighthood *was conferred* upon Randy by the Queen when *he went* to England.”

Here we shifted from passive to active voice.

Correct: “The *Queen conferred* Knighthood upon Randy when *he went* to England.”

Consistent Person

Establish *viewpoint* and stick with it. If you start with 1st person (I, me, my, we, our), then stay with 1st person. If second person (e.g., you), then stay with it. If third (e.g., he, she, they), then stay with that. Do not shift persons (viewpoint).

“Every Christian should believe the Bible, and you should read it everyday.” Here we shifted from third person to second person.

Important note: In academic writing, this issue, i.e., *consistent person*, should be a little easier because you are not to write in first or second person in academic writing. William Zinsser makes this point when he says, “*Colleges don’t want ‘I’ in their term papers or dissertations.*”³ He is right. When you write an academic paper for Columbia Evangelical Seminary, do not refer to yourself, i.e., don’t use “I” or “me” or “my” or even “we.” Also, do not address (i.e., speak directly to) your reader by saying “you.”

Example of Wrong: “In my research I have discovered that the Bible is the most accurate book in the world, and you should read it every day if you are going to grow in the Lord.”

In this sentence, the writer has referred to himself in first person personal pronouns, and he has addressed (or spoken directly to) the reader.

³William Zinsser, On Writing Well (NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990), p. 24.

Consistent Number

Wrong: “The preacher was saying that if each Christian is to grow spiritually, then we must learn to study the Bible.”

Each is singular, and we is plural. So, not only did we shift number here, but did you notice that we also shifted person? We started out with 3rd person, i.e., each Christian, and then we shifted to first person, i.e., we.

Correct: “The preacher was saying that if Christians are to grow spiritually, then they must learn to study the Bible.”

Wrong: “Everyone should learn what it is that God wants them to do.” Everyone is singular, and them is plural.

Correct: “Everyone should learn what it is that God wants him or her to do.”

Wrong: “The fruit of the Spirit are nine qualities which every Christian, if not every person, should incorporate into their life.”

This one is pretty messed up. Did you catch the problems? Let’s look at it again: “The fruit of the Spirit are nine qualities which every Christian, if not every person, should incorporate into their life.”

The first set is correct: “fruit are.” But, then, notice that the writer is speaking of Christians and persons in the singular, i.e., “every Christian” and “every person”; these are both singular. Then, he switches to the plural when he uses the pronoun “their.” Then, he shifts back to the singular when he writes “life.” So he goes from singular to plural back to singular. There are two ways to correct this: (1) keep it singular throughout or (2) make it plural throughout.

Correct Singular: “The fruit of the Spirit are nine qualities which every Christian, if not every person, should incorporate into his or her life.”

Correct Plural: “The fruit of the Spirit are nine qualities which all Christians, if not all people, should incorporate into their lives.”

Consistent Tense

Sometimes writers shift verb tenses from past to present, from present to future, etc. Be sure to stay consistent in your tenses.

Examples:

Inconsistent: We walk into the church just as the pastor began to preach.

Consistent: We walked into the church just as the pastor began to preach.

Consistent: We walk into the church just as the pastor begins to preach.

Inconsistent: I opened the door, and Mike is just standing there.

Consistent: I opened the door, and Mike was just standing there.

Consistent: I open the door, and Mike is just standing there.

Consistency does not mean, however, slavishly using the same tense throughout. It means using the same tense where appropriate, but you may (and must) vary the tense to reflect the distinction of time that you intend.

Example: When I *was much* younger, I *spent* my time racing cars, but now I just *sit* on the couch and *watch* the car races on TV."

This is not an example of inconsistent tense. It is, rather, an example of how tense can be used to properly reflect the distinction of time that you want your reader to understand.

Lecture 4, Exercise
Fix these sentences below

Issues of Dangling Modifiers (Fix these sentences, *without* rearranging the phrases)

1. Having finished all the work, the TV was turned on.
2. After reading the entire book, the argument remains unconvincing.
3. Walking to the store in subzero temperatures, my nose got frostbite.
4. As a child, my mother took me to the circus.
5. Every student needs to hand in their papers by Friday. (correction: this is a *Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement* issue, not a *Dangling Modifier*)

Issues of Subject Verb Agreement (circle the correct answer)

6. The academic curriculum of research and writing often (confuse, confuses) new students.
7. The horse and rider (has, have) just come into the arena.
8. Good communication among business partners (play, plays) a key role.
9. There (were, was) only fifteen students in Rick's grammar class.
10. Either the car or the bikes (need, needs) to go.
11. Either the bikes or the car (need, needs) to go.

Issues of Parallel Structure (Fix These sentences)

12. His arguments were boring, childish, and demonstrated his ignorance.
13. Robert worked late into the evening to catch up on his reading and to write his paper.

Issues of Consistent Person (Fix These sentences)

14. If a person does aerobics, then you will develop a stronger heart.
15. Of course, if we had no grammatical standards, you would not be able to understand each other.

Issues of Consistent Number (Fix These sentences)

16. The seminary students studied philosophy and strengthened their mind.
17. The seminary graduates have their degree in divinity.
18. The real problem is that everyone feels that they are a definitive source of correctness.

Issues of Consistent Tense (Fix These sentences)

19. I was walking down Front Street the other day when a guy comes up to me and asks me for the time.
20. So, Brad and I went fishing last week, and he catches his limit, and I catch nothing!