

## Twelfth Lecture

Course book: *Research Writing Simplified* by Raymond H. Clines & Elizabeth R. Cobb

Seventh chapter: **Writhing with Precision**

### Elements of the essay

**Thesis:** The thesis is the central, controlling idea of the essay and is usually clearly stated early in the essay. It is what you hope your readers will gain by reading the essay; it is *their* connection to the subject, *their* reason for reading it.

**Authentic Purpose:** Being committed to your topic and having an authentic purpose for writing is an important step in becoming an author. The authentic purpose is the reason you care about a subject and the reason you are qualified to write about it; it is *your* connection to the subject.

**Topic Sentence:** The topic sentence is the central idea of a paragraph often stated in a sentence at the beginning.

**Paragraph Unity:** Paragraph unity is limiting each paragraph to one central idea and staying focused on it without digressing into other related or unrelated ideas.

**Development:** Development refers to the use of specific facts, details, explanations, and examples that support the single topic of each paragraph. Usually paragraphs of less than four sentences have not provided sufficient information to explain the topic sentence.

**Organization:** Giving an essay a clear pattern by grouping related ideas together and ordering the ideas for maximum effect, while giving a beginning, middle, and end.

**Focus:** An essay has a clear focus when the writer has chosen an appropriate subject, limited it properly, and stuck to it without including irrelevant information or digression.

**Transitions:** Transitions are words or phrases that link ideas together and create coherence in an essay. Ideally, all paragraphs should begin with transitions, and transitions should also be used frequently within paragraphs to link sentences together.

Transitional words: *likewise, consequently, similarly, next, finally, also, besides, actually, however, further.*

Transitional phrases: *at the same time, as a result, on the other hand, in the first place, to sum up, for example, in fact, in short.*

### Basic Sentence Structure

In order to avoid most major usage errors, one must be able to identify sentences and the independent and subordinate (dependent) clauses that comprise them. Most English sentences follow subject-verb-object order. A clause contains a subject and verb, but not all clauses can stand independently as sentences or independent clauses. Subordinate clauses are patterned like sentences, having subjects and verbs and sometimes objects, but they function within sentences as adjectives, adverbs, or nouns. They *cannot* stand alone. Phrases are groups of words without subjects or verbs and can never stand alone.

*Independent clause:* **By next week, the apple harvest in northern Idaho will be nearly completed.**

*Subordinate clause:* **when the apple harvest is nearly completed**

*Phrases:* **by next week, in northern Idaho**

Depending on the number of independent and subordinate clauses they contain, sentences are classified as simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. Being able to identify clauses is an important step in eliminating comma splices, fused sentences, and fragments. Examples of each sentence type are given below:

- **Simple Sentence:** it contains one independent clause

**We found the missing antique table.**

**David played baseball for many years but now has taken up golf.**

- **Compound Sentence:** it contains two or more independent clauses. The independent clauses are usually joined by coordinating conjunctions, which connect grammatically equal elements. The independent clauses can also be joined with a semicolon. Coordinating conjunctions: *and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet.*

**We found the missing antique table, and we sold it at the charity auction.**

**David played baseball for many years; he now has taken up golf.**

**David played baseball for many years, but he now has taken up golf, and he has gotten quite good.**

Conjunctive adverbs are also used to connect independent clause, and they are used with semicolons. Conjunctive adverbs: *accordingly, also, anyway, besides, certainly, consequently, finally, furthermore, however, indeed, instead, meanwhile, moreover, nevertheless, next, nonetheless, otherwise, similarly, still, subsequently, then, therefore, thus.*

**We found the missing antique table; consequently, we sold it at the charity auction.**

**David played baseball for many years; nonetheless, he has now taken up golf.**

- **Complex Sentence:** it contains one independent clause and one or more subordinate (dependent) clauses. Subordinating conjunctions and relative pronouns introduce subordinate clauses and indicate their relation to the rest of the sentence.

Subordinate conjunctions: *after, although, as, as if, because, before, if in order that, since, than, that, though, unless, until, when, where, whether, while.*

Relative pronouns: *who, whom, whose, which, that.*

**After we found the missing antique table, we sold it at the charity auction.**

**Although David played baseball for many years, he now has taken up golf.**

**David, who played baseball for many years, has taken up golf since all his friends play.**

- **Compound- Complex Sentence:** it contains at least two independent clauses and at least one subordinate clause.

**The antique table, which had been missing for years, was in the attic, and we later sold it at the charity auction.**

### Major Usage Errors

The quality of the content is always the most vital part of any writing. However, two things happen to the content when we fail to follow the conventions of grammar and usage: (1) the ideas become unclear or confusing, and (2) readers will not take seriously ideas that are written with obvious mechanical errors. Students should know that there are only a few *major errors* that will seriously

affect their writing. If a writer can identify and eliminate these major errors, other less serious errors will usually fall away on their own in time as a writer gains more practice.

**Comma Splices:** The *comma splice* is the most common type of usage error. It occurs when two independent clauses are joined, or spliced, with a comma.

**Incorrect:** U.S. educational policies have been almost exclusively a local concern, the federal government had virtually no presence in public education until the early 1960s.

**Fused Sentences:** The *fused sentence* (or run-on) is caused by incorrectly joining two independent clauses or sentences, leaving out any punctuation between them.

**Incorrect:** U.S. educational policies have almost exclusively a local concern the federal government had virtually no presence in public education until the early 1960s.

Comma splices and fused sentences are most easily corrected by:

- 1- Inserting a period and capital letter: . . . a local concern. The federal . . . .
- 2- Inserting a coordinating conjunction (and, or, for, nor, so, yet, but): . . . a local concern, for the federal . . . .
- 3- Inserting a semicolon: . . . a local concern; the federal . . . .

**Sentence Fragments:** A *fragment* is an incomplete sentence punctuated like a complete sentence. Because it is an incomplete thought, it will make little sense when read by itself and usually needs to be connected to the previous or following word group. Notice there is only one complete sentence in the following words groups – the others are fragments:

**The musician's genuine talent.**

**The genuinely talented musician.**

**The musician playing with talent.**

**For the musician to play with talent.**

**Because the musician was genuinely talented.**

**The musician was genuinely talented. (*complete sentence*)**

**Subject-Verb Disagreement:** *Subject-verb disagreement* occurs when subjects and verbs do not agree in number. Most writers have little trouble with this error unless a sentence has several words or phrases separating the subject from the verb and it becomes unclear to the writer which word is actually the subject.

- If the subject is singular, the verb should be singular: *The report on automobile deaths is alarming.*
- If the subject is plural, the verb should be plural: *The reports on automobile deaths are alarming.*

Helpful hints:

- The subject is never found in a prepositional phrase.

*Incorrect: The sound of the drums are mesmerizing.* (*sound* is the subject, not *drums*)

- When subjects are joined by *or*, *either/or*, *neither/nor*, the verb agrees with the closer subject.

**Neither the coach nor the players were ready to accept defeat.**

**Neither the players nor the coach was ready to accept defeat.**

**Pronoun-Antecedent Disagreement:** *Pronoun-antecedent disagreement* usually occurs because of the carryover of informal speech patterns into the more formal situation of writing. Most pronouns substitute for other words. The following sentences have little meaning for us unless we know whom or what the underlined pronouns represent:

**She is an exotic looking model.**

**It was expensive.**

**They enjoyed it.**

Because pronouns stand for other words, make sure they agree in number and gender with whatever or whomever they represent.

**My friend bought her books at Barnes & Noble.**

**My friends bought their books at Barnes & Noble.**

**Indefinite Pronouns:** A special problem exists when the following indefinite pronouns are used as antecedents: *anyone, anybody, each, every, everyone,*

*everybody, everything, someone, somebody, no one, nobody.* While these are all singular, they often refer to groups composed of both genders, and thus using a singular pronoun can be misleading or sexist:

**Everyone should bring his books to class.** (This would be misleading or an example of sexist language in a class composed of both men and women.)

Because using the his/her construction often creates more problems than it solves, the use of plural pronouns to refer to these singular antecedents is becoming acceptable in speech and informal writing:

**Everyone should bring their books to class.**

However, in formal writing it is best to avoid the problem altogether by using plurals when possible or leaving out the pronoun.

**All students should bring their books to class.**

**Everyone should bring books to class.**

**Vague “You”:** The pronoun *you* represents a special problem for many students, because of the carryover of informal speech patterns into writing. Use *you* only when referring to a specific reader, not as substitute for *someone*. For example, **“When you get a job at McDonald’s, the first thing you will do is clean the grills.”** Readers might wonder what you are talking about if they have no intention of working at McDonald’s. Recast such sentences into either first person or third person:

**First Person: When I got a job at McDonald’s, the first thing I had to do was clean the grills.**

**Third Person: Those who begin working at McDonald’s will find themselves cleaning the grills.**

**Sentence Structure:** Errors in *sentence structure* occur when sentences become tangled up or awkwardly worded. They may be a result of faulty comparisons, mixed constructions, misplaced modifiers, lack of parallel structure, or other problems. Identifying the exact problem is not as important as making sure your thoughts are not confusing to readers. When you suspect that you have created a sentence that readers might find hard to understand or that does not sound quite right to you, break it down into one or two short sentences. Use a conventional

subject-verb-object word order, and say what you mean in clear and simple language.

*Sentence structure error:* **By making weekly savings deposits is your best guarantee for having money for the summer.**

*Simplified:* **Weekly savings deposits will guarantee money for the summer.**

*Sentence structure error:* **The use of stream-of-consciousness in the novels of William Faulkner is as effective, if not better than Marcel Proust.**

*Simplified:* **William Faulkner is a better stream-of-consciousness writer than Marcel Proust.**

**Clichés:** *Clichés* are predictable expressions that pop into our minds and give us an easy way to emphasize a concept. Unfortunately, using a cliché (or figure of speech) that we have heard somewhere before will only make our writing seem stale and unoriginal, even if the expression was quite vivid at one time. Instead of using caliche, it would be better to describe a situation in honest detail. Your writing will naturally be fresh and interesting. Avoid expressions such as the following:

seemed like an eternity

spread like wildfire

in this day and age

throw in the towel

crack of dawn

easier said than done

spring in the air

fraught with danger

stick to your guns

walking on eggs