

ADVANCED GRAMMAR: LIFE SUPPORT FOR THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Our experience has taught us that even seasoned medical writers (ourselves included) sometimes have difficulty with certain points of grammar and usage. Because participants in several AMWA workshops have stated that they have had little formal training in grammar, this article discusses three common grammatical problems: subject-verb disagreement, pronoun difficulties, and misplaced modifiers, with particular emphasis on the dangling participle. Subject-verb disagreement occurs most frequently when prepositional phrases that intervene between the subject and the verb and when the *either . . . or*, *neither . . . nor*, and *one of . . . who* constructions are used. Pronoun difficulties are caused most often by uncertainty about the case of the pronoun, by the confusion between *that* and *which*, and by the attempt to avoid sexist language. We use sample sentences to exemplify rules that determine correct usage, and we present a list of reference works that will be helpful to biomedical communicators seeking to improve their grammar skills.

WHEN you hear the phrase “for you and I,” does it make you shiver just as you did in junior high when some guy ran his fingernail down the blackboard? Does the sentence “Bob or one of the boys are going to the game” make you grind your teeth in frustration? When you hear someone on TV ask “Why do sick people lay on their backs?” do you find yourself shouting “Lie! Lie!” at the screen?

These not-uncommon errors represent something seriously disturbing to those of us who were taught our grammar well. That something is the feeling that the English language is being deformed, hacked away at with the sawteeth of negligence and lack of concern. And not just the laity is to blame; even we “professional” writers contribute to the deformation of the language.

When the two of us recently edited a book of essays for AMWA, we were surprised at the number of grammatical errors we found in some of the essays. And we ourselves are not exempt: after our first Advanced Grammar workshop in Vancouver, one of the participants wrote to suggest that perhaps we were too easily convinced by the *-a* at the end of *flora*: it is, she reminded us, a singular noun and, as such, does not take the plural verb we said was the correct answer.

Both of us have taught AMWA core curriculum workshops on several topics, including punctuation and sentence structure. Each time we teach them, several of our participants tell us that grammar was not taught in their schools. Except for the occasional Catholic school student, most workshop participants seem not to have had the intensive grammar instruction,

complete with diagramming, that we remember from our school days. Is this a problem? Does grammar still matter? We think so, and here’s why.

Many of the finer points of punctuation and sentence structure depend on a knowledge of the parts of a sentence and their relationship to each other. For example, proper punctuation generally requires a semicolon between two independent clauses joined without a conjunction, but a comma is correct between two independent clauses joined with a coordinating conjunction. In sentence structure workshops, we teach something called the hierarchy of emphasis: that is, ideas receive varying degrees of emphasis as they are placed in different types of sentence constructions. According to the hierarchy, emphasis decreases as information is moved from an entire sentence to an independent clause,

to a dependent clause, to a participial phrase, to a prepositional phrase, to an adjective or adverb.

Do you understand all of the terms in the preceding paragraph? If so, congratulations! Many of your AMWA colleagues do not, and those colleagues sometimes have difficulty properly punctuating a sentence or emphasizing its contents. And many of those colleagues have approached us after our workshops asking for additional help.

Because of these experiences, we decided that a brief review of some common grammatical errors is in order, even in a professional journal for professional writers. In this article, we present some of the topics we believe are most problematic: subject-verb disagreement, pronoun difficulties, and problems with modifiers.

SUBJECT-VERB DISAGREEMENT

Intervening phrases

We all know that the subject and verb must agree in number and person. For example, we write “This *disease* has devastating effects,” or “*Children* with this disease rarely *survive* to adulthood,” or “*I* have never read an article on this topic before.” However, many people are confused by phrases that intervene between the subject and the verb; they seem to believe that because the noun in the phrase is nearer the verb than the subject is, it must influence the form of the verb. Of course, only the subject can have such an influence.

Here’s an example: “Perhaps the strongest aspect of these articles *is/are* the numerous references that they cite.” Did you correctly select *is* as the verb form? If so, you must have realized that the subject of the sentence is *aspect*, a singular noun, and not *articles*, which is the object of a preposition (in the phrase “of these articles”) and thus does not determine the form of the verb. The verb is also unaffected by *references*, which is a predicate noun (a noun that follows a linking verb and renames the subject). Listen closely to news reports, and you’ll probably detect this kind of mistake at least once in each broadcast.

Either . . . or

Another subject-verb agreement problem is caused when the words *either . . . or* join the parts of a compound subject, as in “*Either* Jack or his brothers *likes/like* chocolate.” In such sentences (and in those with *neither . . . nor* as well), the verb agrees in person and number with the subject closer to it. (Please note that we wrote “the *subject* closer to it,” not “the *noun* closer to it”; see the

preceding paragraph.) In this sentence, the correct answer is *like*, because the closer subject is the plural *brothers*.

Even when, in such sentences, phrases further separate the subjects from the verb, it is still the subject closer to the verb that determines the correct verb form. In the sentence “Neither the boys in their capes nor Jonathan with his two swords *was/were* chosen,” we must not be fooled by the plural *swords* (it’s the object of a preposition and therefore cannot also be the subject of the sentence). The subjects are *boys* and *Jonathan*, and because *Jonathan* is singular and closer to the verb, the correct choice is *was*. But, you may object, it just doesn’t sound right to say “swords was.” Don’t follow sound (just because something *sounds* right does not mean it *is* right); follow the appropriate rule.

One of . . . who

Here’s one last problem that often arises with regard to subject-verb agreement. Consider the following sentence: “Dr. Smith is *one of* those physicians *who cares/care* deeply about each patient.” What is the subject of the verb? If your answer was *who*, you are correct. But here’s the problem: is *who* singular or plural? In other words, does the word *who* refer to *Dr. Smith* (singular) or to *physicians* (plural)? The answer is the latter: there are many physicians who care about their patients, and Dr. Smith is only one of the many. Therefore, the correct verb is *care*. A general rule to live by is that the *one of . . . who* construction always takes a plural verb.

PRONOUN DIFFICULTIES

Case

If you’ve ever studied a foreign language, particularly Latin or German, you will understand the term *case* as it applies to nouns and pronouns. In many foreign languages, nouns and pronouns change form as they are used in different parts of the sentence. In English, we no longer have a case structure for nouns, but the case structure for pronouns remains. Therefore, we must distinguish between *he*, *him*, and *his*: *he* is in the nominative or subjective case (used as the subject of a verb), *him* is in the objective case (used as the object of a verb or a preposition), and *his* is in the possessive case (used to show ownership and other relationships).

Most people don’t have problems with case; someone (either a parent or a teacher) usually taught them not to say “Me and John are going to play ball now.” But, as we noted in the first sentence of the introduction to this

article, many of us are not always sure which case is correct. And part of that problem is that we aren't exactly sure how the pronoun is used in the sentence.

For example, what is your choice for the correct answer in the sentence "Give the award to *whoever/whomever* makes the best presentation"? Many people would select *whomever*, thinking that the pronoun is the object of the preposition *to* and should be in the objective case. There's only one problem with that logic: it's incorrect! The object of the preposition *to* is the entire dependent clause "*whoever/whomever* makes the best presentation." Thus, to determine which pronoun to use, you must first determine how the pronoun is used in the clause. In this case, the pronoun is the subject of the verb *makes*, so the correct pronoun is *whoever*, the nominative form.

But now consider the sentence "Give the award to *whoever/whomever* you choose." In this sentence, the object of the preposition *to* is again the entire dependent clause "*whoever/whomever* you choose." But in this example, the pronoun is used within the clause as the direct object of the verb *choose*. Therefore, the correct pronoun choice is *whomever*.

Having written these paragraphs, we feel compelled to mention the fact that our dear friend and mentor, Edie Schwager, has often said that the distinction between *who* and *whom* is rapidly becoming a lost cause. Nevertheless, we old die-hards would like to maintain the distinction a little longer!

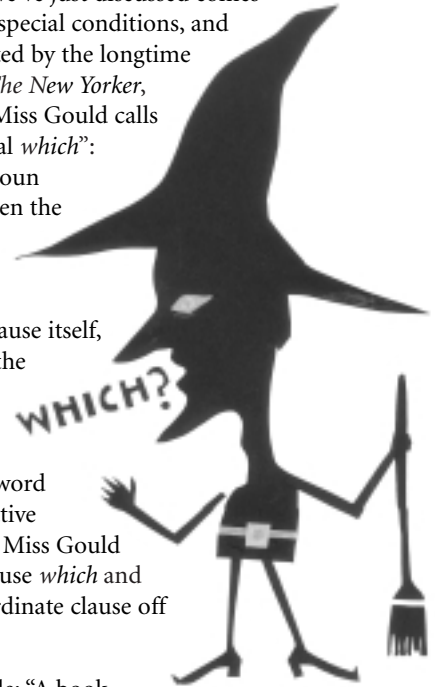
That and which

The pronouns *that* and *which* cause many problems, especially when they are used as relative pronouns. Relative pronouns join (relate) subordinate clauses to a main clause, as in "The number of strokes *that* are reported each year is rising" or in "Heart disease, *which* is on the rise, affects both men and women." As a general rule, we use *that* when the subordinate clause is restrictive: that is, when the inclusion of the subordinate clause restricts (or defines) the meaning of the main clause. When the subordinate clause is nonrestrictive—that is, when the main clause would mean the same thing even without the inclusion of the subordinate clause—we set off the subordinate clause from the main clause with commas and use *which* as the relative pronoun. Many writers use *which* all the time, even with restrictive clauses. E.B. White, in his rewriting of Strunk's wonderful little book, *The Elements of Style*, includes a reminder for such writers: "The careful writer, watchful for small conveniences, goes *which*-hunting, removes the defining *whiches*, and by so doing improves his work."¹ By that, he means that we should be sure to use *which* only to

introduce a nonrestrictive clause. Otherwise, we should replace *which* with *that*.

Of course, there are always exceptions to every rule (don't you just *love* English grammar!). The exception to the *that/which* rule we've just discussed comes only under very special conditions, and it was promulgated by the longtime proofreader of *The New Yorker*, Eleanor Gould. Miss Gould calls it "the exceptional *which*":

when a second noun intervenes between the one being modified by the restrictive clause and the clause itself, especially when the second noun might be misread as the antecedent (the word to which the relative pronoun refers), Miss Gould suggests that we use *which* and not set the subordinate clause off with commas.²



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Here's an example: "A book about stars *which* I like very much is *Peterson's Guide to the Stars*." Because the sentence uses no commas to set off a nonrestrictive clause, we might think that the correct relative pronoun would be *that*. However, *that* would then seem to refer to *stars*, and it's not the stars that we like very much but, instead, the book. Because we want our readers to know that the relative pronoun refers to *book*, we use *which*.

SEXIST LANGUAGE

We are fully aware that at this point we are opening a can of worms. Although we sympathize completely with those who say that referring to a physician as *he* (as in the sentence "Each physician should complete *his* progress notes on time") may suggest that women can't or shouldn't be physicians, we are old-fashioned enough to wish for a solution that does not destroy the grammar of the language. Too often, writers take the easy way out with a sentence like "Each physician should complete *their* progress notes on time." What is the problem with this sentence? The problem is that the noun *physician* is singular, but the pronoun that refers to the physician, *their*, is plural. This grammatical error is known as *pronoun-antecedent disagreement*. English grammar has traditionally used the generic pronoun *he* (or its other

forms, *him* or *his*) in such sentences; the pronoun was not considered to have gender. However, political correctness prevents most of us from being comfortable with the traditional form. Fortunately, there are several ways to correct the problem.³ None of these solutions will work every time, but we can choose the one that works best for each sentence.

The simplest and most obvious solution is to pluralize both the noun and the pronoun: “All *physicians* should complete *their* progress notes on time.” Another option is to replace the pronoun with a verb phrase: “Each physician should be punctual *in completing progress notes*.” A third solution is to substitute a different word for the pronoun: “Each physician should complete *all* progress notes on time.” A fourth is to recast the sentence so that it is written in the passive voice: “Each physician’s progress notes *should be completed* on time.” Finally, it’s fine to use “he or she” or “his or her,” as long as we use them only once (or very sparingly): when overused, these options become very distracting and frustrating for the reader. Using this option, we might write “Each physician should complete his or her progress notes on time.”

Most style guides we have consulted recommend that we avoid the use of *he/she*, *his/her*, and the terrible *s/he*. With a bit of effort, almost any sentence can be rewritten so that it is both politically and grammatically correct.

PROBLEMS WITH MODIFIERS

Dangling Participles

The dangling participle, another notorious grammatical error, causes confusion and, almost always, laughter. Here’s an example from Edie Schwager’s famous book *Medical Usage and Abuse*: “Built in 1765, the mayor of Philadelphia lived here.”⁴ Most mayors are born, not built! Here’s another example: “Having read the patient’s history, a few questions occurred to the physician.” Don’t you love those questions that can read?

Although most of us remember hearing about dangling participles, we can’t really remember what a participle is. In the days when more high schools offered Latin classes, many students knew that participles are forms of verbs that are used as adjectives but still indicate tense. For instance, the regular verb *walk* can form a present participle (*walking*) and a past participle (*walked*); the irregular verb *take* forms the present participle *taking* and the past participle *taken*. Both the present participle and the past participle can cause problems when they dangle: when they aren’t close enough to the word they modify or when the sentence does not contain something for them to modify. In the example from Edie’s book, the

word *built* is a past participle, but the item that it modifies is not found in the sentence. We have to guess at what it modifies. In the second example above, the participle *having* modifies the physician, who had read the history, but its placement suggests that it modifies *questions* instead.

In medical writing, problems seem to occur most often with three particular participles. *Based* is often used incorrectly. For instance, in the sentence “Based on this study, we recommend that the patient be treated with chemotherapy,” the participle *based* has nothing to modify; its placement, however, suggests that it modifies *we*, and we know that we are not based on the study. One way to solve the problem is to rewrite the sentence as follows: “On the basis of this study, we recommend that the patient be treated with chemotherapy.”

The participle *using* also often dangles. Look at the following sentence: “Dr. Young treated the patients using antidepressants.” The intended meaning of this sentence is probably that Dr. Young used antidepressants to treat the patients; however, the placement of the participle obscures the meaning. Did Dr. Young use antidepressants to treat the patients, or did he treat only those patients who were using antidepressants? A quick fix for the

SELECTED HANDBOOKS AND STYLE GUIDES

- Crews F. *The Random House Handbook*. 6th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill Inc; 1992.
- Huth EJ. *Medical Style and Format: An International Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers*. Philadelphia: ISI Press; 1987.
- Huth EJ. *Writing and Publishing in Medicine*. 3rd ed. [Previously titled *How to Write and Publish Papers in the Medical Sciences*.] Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins; 1999.
- Iverson C (chair). *American Medical Association Manual of Style: A Guide for Authors and Editors*. 9th ed. Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins; 1998.
- Sabin WA. *The Gregg Reference Manual*. 8th ed. New York: Glencoe/McGraw-Hill; 1996.
- Schwager E. *Medical English Usage and Abuse*. Phoenix: Oryx Press; 1991.
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- Zeiger M. *Essentials of Writing Biomedical Research Papers*. New York: McGraw-Hill Inc; 1991.

problem would be to insert the word *by*: “Dr. Young treated the patients *by* using antidepressants.” However, recasting the sentence (“Dr. Young used antidepressants to treat the patients”) or rearranging the phrases so that the participle is closer to the noun it modifies (“Using antidepressants, Dr. Young treated the patients”) completely clarifies the sentence’s meaning.

Here’s another example: “It is prudent to screen all patients with newly diagnosed disease using multiplex RT-PCR assays.” How could the disease use these assays? The obvious answer is that it couldn’t; a revision of the sentence might read “It is prudent to use multiplex RT-PCR assays to screen all patients with newly diagnosed disease.”

Sentences using *compared* also frequently cause problems: for example, “On average, larger mothers give birth to heavier babies compared with smaller women” (why are we comparing the babies with the smaller women?) and “Men under the age of 50 have four times the risk of sudden cardiac death compared with women of the same age” (why are we comparing death with women?). The first sentence needs to be rewritten: “On average, when compared with smaller women, larger mothers give birth to heavier babies” is a bit better; even better would be “On average, the babies of larger mothers are heavier than those of smaller women.” Of course, asking the author to define terms like *smaller*, *larger*, and *heavier* and then rewriting the sentence would produce the best revision. The second sentence also requires rewriting: “For men under the age of 50, the risk of sudden cardiac death is four times that for women of the same age.”

Misplaced Modifiers

Dangling participles are just one example of a whole group of problems that could be classified as misplaced modifiers. Like dangling participles, misplaced modifiers need to be placed closer to the words they modify; then they won’t be misplaced or misunderstood. For example, how would you correct the following sentences?

Patient has chest pain if she lies on her left side for more than a year.

As director of the conference, we think you should select the speaker.

Please prepare a list of your physicians broken down by age and sex.

The problems in these sentences are caused by misplacement of several types of modifiers. The first sentence contains a misplaced prepositional phrase (“for more than a year”). In English, prepositional phrases act in the sentence as either adjectives or adverbs, depending

on the word they modify. “For more than a year” is a prepositional phrase used as an adverb; it modifies the verb, because it explains when the patient had the chest pain. The physician’s note would have been clearer had he or she written “Patient has had, for more than a year, chest pain when she lies on her left side” or “For more than a year, the patient has had chest pain when she lies on her left side.” The second example contains a misplaced prepositional phrase used as an adjective. The phrase “As director of the conference” modifies the pronoun *you*, but it is misplaced so that it seems to modify *we*. A better version of the sentence would be “We think that you, as director of the conference, should select the speaker.” The final example contains a misplaced participial phrase, “broken down by age and sex.” It is the list, not the physicians, that should be broken down in these ways.

How Did You Do?

Were you able to revise all of our bad examples correctly? If so, you obviously don’t need a grammar refresher. If not, maybe it’s time to review the rules.

How do we, as workshop leaders brave (or foolish) enough to develop a course in advanced grammar, know all these rules? Even though we learned them in junior high, memory is unreliable, as we know all too well. We depend on written rules, and we go back—often—to check them. Do you remember when, as a freshman in college, you were required to purchase for your classes an English “handbook” of some kind? Such handbooks or style guides are still the sources we use most often when we need to check rules. But because many of those who participate in our AMWA workshops tell us that they never had such a text, we include with this article a sidebar listing the handbooks and style guides that we find most helpful. We encourage you to turn to them, as we do, when you’re not sure about a grammar rule or correct usage. And if you have an interest in discussing these points in more detail, we’d love to see you in our Advanced Grammar workshop!



REFERENCES

1. Strunk W Jr, White EB. *The Elements of Style*. 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co Inc; 1979:59.
2. Wallraff B. Word court. *Atlantic Monthly*. 1995;275(6):124. [Barbara Wallraff is completing work on a book entitled *Word Court*, which will be proofread by Eleanor Gould and published by Harcourt Brace & Company in January 2000.]
3. Kolln M, Funk R. *Understanding English Grammar*. 5th ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon; 1998:374-378.
4. Schwager E. *Medical English Usage and Abuse*. Phoenix: Oryx Press; 1991:44.