



# University of Nigeria

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**THE USE**

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- (f) Violence as an appropriate response to the resolution of inter-group conflict *is* sanctioned by national leaders.
- (g) Learning may not account completely for human aggression, but the social forces in contemporary society that *encourage* its development *are* so evident that the recent preoccupation with hypothesised biological factors *seems* excessive and far-fetched.
- The sentences above are good examples of the causes of mistakes in agreement. From your observation of the sentences, what are some of these causes?
  - Describe the device the author has used to achieve sentence variety in the passage.
  - Determine the meaning of the following words from their contexts:
    - lethal
    - culmination
    - evolution
    - contemporary
    - inventory
    - viable
    - innate
    - aggressive
    - instinct
    - aberration
    - intention
    - wholly
    - hypothesis
    - preoccupation
  - Recast the sentences in which the above words occur using their appropriate synonyms.
  - Assess the effectiveness of the passage *in* terms of the author's choice of words and sentence structure.

## CHAPTER 6

# Clarity

by

M. C. Iwundu, Benson Oluikpe and F. E. Ngwaibe

We have surveyed sentences, clauses, and phrases, which we manipulate to form various types of sentences. We have also examined the most essential rule for producing standard sentences. It remains, however, for us to discuss the devices we employ to make our sentences clear. The choice and use we make of linguistic devices in order to communicate effectively is what we refer to in this book as clarity. Although every purposeful writer has his own choice of linguistic devices, he fails sometimes to communicate as clearly as he hoped to do. This is because he lapses sometimes in his manipulation of the choices he makes. Such lapses result in mistakes called *faulty parallelism*, *fragmentation*, *dangling modifiers*, *ambiguity*, and *wordiness*. The aim of this chapter is, therefore, to show you how best to guard against such faults in your attempt to write clearly.

### 6.1 PARALLELISM

Higher sentences appear in various forms. That which we have created up to this point. Open words or word groups perform the same function in the sentence, we say that they are in parallel form (parallelism). You use this form especially for writing a series of words or word groups of identical grammar. It helps you to emphasise the grammatical and logical relationships of the ideas you express. Also, parallel grammatical structure reinforces your thought by stressing the parallel importance of the various sentence elements, and so makes life easier for your reader. Many of the most famous phrases in English draw strength in part from effective use of parallelism, as in the following:

- (i) . . . life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (group of three nouns)
- (ii) . . . of the people, by the people, and for the people. (three prepositional phrases)

- (iii) Love me or leave me. (two imperatives)
- (iv) Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy and wealthy and wise. (two infinitives, three adjectives)
- (v) To be or not to be, that is the question. (two infinitives)
- (vi) I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. (two infinitives with objects)
- (vii) Friends, Romans, countrymen. (three nouns)
- (viii) I came, I saw, I conquered. (three sentences)
- (ix) Peace on earth, goodwill toward men. (two nouns, each with prepositional phrase)
- (x) Better be safe than sorry. (two adjectives)
- (xi) ... the land of the free and the home of the brave. (two nouns, each with a prepositional phrase)
- (xii) During the weekend, we watched dances, movies, and dramas. (three nouns)
- (xiii) Later on, we went to the market and bought books, shoes, and pens. (three nouns)

To produce effective sentences in parallel form, you must make single nouns, pronouns, verbs, verb forms, phrases, and clauses perform the same function in the sentence, as the examples above illustrate. According to the examples, the nouns, verbs, and groups of words in the sentences are well arranged to behave alike in each sentence. In that way, both the logical and the grammatical ideas tie up neatly to make your sentence effective. Your inability to arrange well your words of nouns, verbs, phrases, etc., may produce sentences of the following types:

- (i) He enjoys cooking, dancing and to sing. (two nouns, gerunds, and a verbal)
- (ii) One can go to Lagos by car, bus or fly. (two nouns, and all of a sudden a verb).
- (iii) During the previous JAMB examinations, the supervisor told us to write fast and that we should write on only one side of the paper. (shift from infinitive to clause)
- (iv) Lamenting the death of his father, the student said, "Onwubualili was a good father, a loving husband, and worked hard".<sup>1</sup> (adjective-noun, adjective-noun, verb-adverb)

<sup>1</sup> The sentence: "Onwubualili was a good father, a loving husband who worked hard," is acceptable because *who worked hard* modifies husband.

The sentences fail to be effective because they do not have parallel words and word groups. Your reader must adjust to a change in the form of the words and word groups before he can get the meanings intended. Such adjustments make your writing ineffective. To be effective, therefore, you need to recast the sentences thus:

- (i) He enjoys cooking, dancing, and singing.
- (ii) One can go to Lagos by car, by bus, or by air.
- (iii) During the previous JAMB examinations, the Supervisor told us to write on only one side of the paper.
- (iv) Lamenting the death of his father, the student said, "Ogwu-budi was a good father, a loving husband, and a hard worker".

All in all, parallelism is an indispensable aid to style and meaning. However, we should keep in mind that the value of parallelism is limited to cases in which the various elements are of equal importance. Thus if you try to parallel unequal elements, you wind up with startling calamities.

Now an exercise.

### Exercises

1. The one-time famous American freedom fighter, Martin Luther King, Jr., used a series of parallel sentences as an effective way of emphasizing statements or ideas. Read carefully the following excerpt from his "I have a dream":

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. . . . This is our hope. This is our faith. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the clanging discord of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

From the excerpt, answer the following question:

- (i) Copy out any five sentences used as parallelism.

- (ii) Underline the parallel structures in the following question about King's speech:

Is it necessary to know the time, the place, the occasion, and the audience for King's speech in order to understand its effectiveness?

2. The late, youngest, American President John F. Kennedy is another person who also made extensive use of parallel clauses and sentences in his writing. Read the following sentence from his "Memory of a Nation":

When Americans fight for individual liberty, they have Thomas Jefferson and James Madison beside them; when they strive for social justice, they strive alongside Andrew Jackson and Franklin Roosevelt; when they work for peace and a world community, they work with Woodrow Wilson; when they fight and die in wars to make men free, they fight and die with Abraham Lincoln.

Compare the sentences with King's speech (i) above. Render your observation in two parallel sentences.

3. Correct the following sentences:

- (i) I am thinking of a career in law, medicine, or doing chemical research.
- (ii) Writers pride themselves on achieving large sales and to get favourable reviews from the critics.
- (iii) It was an interesting suggestion and which we proceeded to consider.
- (iv) In the evening we would attend the lecture and dancing afterwards.
- (v) He decided that he would need a larger car and with plenty of space in the trunk.
- (vi) She was a conscientious student and whose word could be completely relied on.
- (vii) I suggested that he apply disinfectant to the cut, bandage it, and that he see doctor as soon as possible.
- (viii) Not only was he thoughtless but also insolent.
- (ix) Up to this stage, you have learned that your writing should be mechanically correct, organisationally logical, and with good ideas.

Read aloud the following sentence from J. F. Kennedy's "Inaugural Address"<sup>1</sup>:

. . . Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths and encourage the arts and commerce.

Using the above as a model, write five similar sentences.

### FRAGMENTATION

When you punctuate an incomplete sentence as if it were a complete sentence, it results in fragmentation. It is quite simple for you to recognise fragmentation in writing because it lacks one or more of the basic elements of a sentence – subject or predicate. Typically a word or a phrase that stands alone is a fragment. In order to avoid fragmentary statements, you should make sure that your sentence contains the basic elements of a sentence, otherwise the sentence may end up with fragmentation, as in the following:

- (i) The article "The Conquest Man Can't Make" *which appeared on Wednesday page seven of the Daily Times of February 13 which makes interesting reading. (Daily Times, Nigeria, Saturday, March 8, 1980, p. 13.)*
- (ii) During the cultural week in the University, there were many events that took place. *Such as plays, concerts, and many other things.*
- (iii) The lecturer gave us many new assignments. *In addition to the old ones which we have not even submitted.*
- (iv) I cannot afford to go out today because I have many activities to keep me busy. *Shopping, reading, and thinking.*

Obviously the italicised are fragments, and have either omission of the subjects or the verbs. But notice that the fragmentation occurred as a result of poor punctuation. You can use punctuation to solve these problems, thus:

- (v) During the cultural week in the University, there were many events that took place, such as plays, concerts, and many other things.
- (vi) The lecturer gave us many new assignments, in addition to the old ones which we have not even submitted.

<sup>1</sup> The full text of J. F. Kennedy's "Inaugural Address" is in J. Cafferata, *Bites* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1975), pp. 374-5.



- (vii) I cannot afford to go out today because I have many activities to keep me busy: writing, reading, and drinking.

Apart from the omission of the subject or the verbs, another source of fragmentation is confusion of a clause with a sentence.

Let us re-examine this sentence:

The article "The Conquest Man Can't Make" which appeared on Wednesday page seven of the *Daily Times* of February 13 which makes interesting reading. (*Daily Times*, Nigeria, Saturday, March 8, 1980, p. 13.)

The fragment has two clauses, both serving as subject. Because there is no predicate, the sentence fails to express a complete thought. The problem, however, is clearly a confusion of a sentence with a clause. Since two clauses occurring simultaneously cannot produce a sentence, you resolve the problem as follows: change the second clause to a sentence by deleting the relative pronoun. Thus the sentence gets a subject and a predicate in the process as in these revised versions:

- (i) The article, "The Conquest Man Can't Make" which appeared on Wednesday page seven of the *Daily Times* of February 13, makes interesting reading.
- (ii) The article, "The Conquest Man Can't Make", which makes interesting reading, appeared on Wednesday, page seven of the *Daily Times* of February 13, 1980.

To be able to identify fragments, you should note that any construction introduced by the following:

after	as though	if	than
although	because	in order to	though
as if	before	once	unless
as	even if	provided that	until
as long as	even though	since	whenever
as soon as	how	so that	while

cannot stand alone as a complete sentence. Examine the following constructions:

- (i) My brother sent me a lovely gift. *Because I passed my examinations.*
- (ii) *As long as he comes home before Christmas.*
- (iii) *Since Nigeria is said to be one nation.*

Then compare the first fragment with its revised version as follows:

- (i) My brother sent me a lovely gift because I passed my examinations.

or

- (ii) Because I passed my examinations, my brother sent me a lovely gift.

Tied up with the confusion of a clause with a sentence is the confusion of finite with non-finite verbs. Non-finite verbs are those forms of verbs which cannot serve alone as the main verb of a sentence. Some examples are: infinitives (*to see, to do, to walk*) and participles (*doing, walking, seeing*). Finite verbs are, on the contrary, those forms which can serve as the main verb. Examples are the present tense (*go, goes*), past tense (*went, ate, slept*). Most often fragmentation is the result of a faulty verb, as in:

- (i) We could not afford to vote for the political party. *The leader being corrupt.*
- (ii) University lecturers should not be disturbed by little things. *Lovers holding hands. A student coming a few minutes late to class. Some students leaving the campus before the closing date.*
- (iii) *To make Nigeria a better nation. To do my best at all times.* These are my goals.

You may not see how serious these errors are for you assume that the words make up sentences. But notice how the confusion of non-finites is eliminated in the following:

- (i) We could not afford to vote for the political party. The leader is corrupt.
- (ii) University lecturers should not be disturbed by such little things as: lovers holding hands, a student coming a few minutes late to class, and some students leaving the campus before the closing date.
- (iii) I want to make Nigeria a better nation. I want to do my best at all times. These are my goals.
- (iv) Mother will not worry as long as Okeke comes home on Christmas.

or

As long as he comes home on Christmas, mother will not worry.

- (v) I voted for the party with the emblem of unity because Nigeria should be united.

or

Since Nigeria should be united, I voted for the party with the emblem of unity.

As much as possible, you should avoid sentence fragments. In some situations, however, they can sometimes be justified especially if you want a sudden dramatic effect. For example, it is very well known that conversational language abounds in questions, answers, and exclamations that do not follow the usual sentence patterns. Even in formal English, such familiar expressions as:

So much for this point  
 Now for my second argument  
 The sooner, the better

are perfectly acceptable in a suitable context, although they are fragments. Notice the dramatic effect achieved in the following:

- (i) I shall never consent to a degree in the lower division. *Never!*  
 (ii) Not only doesn't the student understand the word, but far worse, he doesn't even know that he doesn't understand it. *And the astonishment and disbelief in his eyes when you tell him that words often have more than one meaning!*  
 (Seymour B. Chatman, "Linguistics and Teaching Introductory Literature", *Allene Readings in Applied English Linguistics*, p. 307).

Before we discuss another stylistic problem, do the exercise below.

### Exercise

- Correct the following sentences to eliminate the fragments:
  - We take course in the Use of English. Because the University authority insists on it-as a requirement for graduation.
  - For our career goals in relation to the future. We must persevere.
  - While we study very hard to pass the courses. We very often score low grades.
  - It was late. So the returning officers went home for the day.
  - Although election results had not been received from all the

- (vi) As long as we run quickly to get home before it rains.
- (vii) Being the only student that stood still when the armed robber attacked the Principal in his house.
- (viii) Unless every Nigerian citizen joins to make Nigeria one nation.
- (ix) In reply to your advertisement in the *Sunday Times* of this week, requesting applications for the posts of clerical assistants.
- (x) Although I wrote the letter but did not have time to post it.
- (xi) Nigerian rain makers. In fact they make rain.
- (xii) Violence is becoming a tool for robbery. Just because the Government has a ban on guns.
- (xiii) Ghana and Nigeria have identical governments. The only difference being their leaders.
- (xiv) To see my children through higher education. To have enough for my retirement age. These are my ambition.
- (xv) I read a paper titled, "Equality of Women's Education with Men's." Which many people have not seen.
- (xvi) He being present.
- (xvii) He looked as if nothing had happened. Laughing.
- (xviii) Not only that he walked off.

### 6.3 WORDINESS

Wordiness simply means using more words than necessary. Two factors account for this. The first is writing to impress instead of writing to communicate. The second is the inability to control the flow of ideas. While wordiness invariably gives rise to long sentences, it does not follow that short sentences cannot be wordy. Whether sentences are long or short, what finally determines wordiness is the existence in a sentence of words which cannot be seen to be serving any useful purpose. Let us examine the following:

- (i) He works methodically and is very well organised.
- (ii) Ike's mother's personal feeling about her marriage was that the whole affair was an unlucky incident.

The phrase *very well organised* in (i) above merely repeats the idea already implied in the word *methodically*. That sentence would be better if written in either of the following two ways:

- (a) He works methodically.
- (b) He is very well organised.

Similarly, in (ii) above, the sentence is not long but lacks simplicity and directness because it is wordy. The word *personal* is unnecessary since the woman's feeling cannot be anything else but personal. The phrase *the whole affair* is meaningless since the writer is not referring to the marriage as a ceremony. The word *incident* is unnecessary. If we revise the sentence, we shall have a shorter and better version:

Ike's mother felt that her marriage was unlucky.

Experience has shown that wordiness is the most common stylistic problem facing many of you in your attempt to use the English language. An important question then arises: "How do we combat the problem?" We may answer the question by providing you with the following rules to serve as guides:

1. Eliminate unnecessary words as modifiers. Thus, in the following:

- (i) The Institute of Technology, Enugu, has been converted to a real University of Technology.
- (ii) My brother is ten years *of age*.
- (iii) The accident resulted in the death of ten people *of those involved*.

The italicised words are unnecessary, and, therefore, should be eliminated.

2. Convert clauses to phrases, phrases to words where necessary. For instance, the italicised in the following sentences:

- (i) *When he returned home*, John did his class assignment. (clause)
- (ii) *Because she was ill*, Ada could not attend the meeting. (clause)
- (iii) *Being angry*, our lecturer refused to mark our papers. (phrase)
- (iv) *While laughing*, the host handed the gifts to her guests. (phrase)
- (v) With the defeat of the Nigerian Green Eagles, *the honour of Nigeria* was at stake. (phrase)
- (vi) The father *of the man* cried bitterly. (phrase)
- (vii) He is the youngest *of my brothers*. (phrase)

could be revised as follows:

- (i) *Having returned home*, John did his class assignment. (phrase)
- (ii) *Being ill*, Ada could not attend the meeting. (phrase)
- (iii) *Angry*, our lecturer refused to mark our papers. (word)

- (iv) *Laughing*, the host handed the gifts to her guests. (word)
- (v) With the defeat of the Nigerian Green Eagles, *Nigeria's* honour was at stake. (word)
- (vi) The *man's* father cried bitterly. (word)
- (vii) He is my youngest *brother*. (word)

3. Revise the perfect tense to simple present or past. For example:  
The guerrillas *have demanded* the release of all political prisoners.  
becomes shorter and more effective when rewritten thus:

The guerrillas demanded the release of all political prisoners.

4. Change passive verbs to active. This rule is important, since we know that when the verb of a sentence is in the passive voice the subject of the sentence is not doing the acting, but is being acted upon. Thus, the following:

- (i) The building was seized by the guerrillas.
- (ii) Many ballot boxes were stolen by some party supporters.
- (iii) The town bus was *overloaded* by the bus conductors with passengers and their wares.

become:

- (i) The guerrillas *seized* the building.
- (ii) Some party supporters *stole* many ballot boxes.
- (iii) The bus conductors *overloaded* the bus with passengers and their wares.

5. Avoid, as much as possible, sentences beginning with *there*.

Example:

- (i) *There are* some people in Nigeria who think that Mugabe is the right man for Zimbabwe.
- (ii) *There are* many things that can be done to eliminate wordiness in a sentence.

These are made more effective by recasing them thus:

- (i) Some people in Nigeria think that Mugabe is the right man for Zimbabwe.
- (ii) Many things can be done to eliminate wordiness in a sentence.

We believe that if you observe the rules given above, you will be on your way to eliminating wordiness in your written English. Since wordiness is a major problem, we provide you with the following exercises.

because it does not logically relate to the subject of the sentence, *jet plane*. Here are other examples of dangling modifiers:

- (i) *Running to the notice board*, her Use of English grade was seen.
- (ii) *Looking tired*, a bed rest was needed.
- (iii) *Seeing Uche for the first time*, his personality repelled me.

You could, from the examples above, see that there is no logical relationship between the italicised phrases and the subject of the sentences. To make the phrases and the subjects relate logically, we revise the sentences thus:

- (i) *Running to the notice board*, she saw her Use of English grade.
- (ii) *Looking tired*, she felt she needed some bed rest.
- (iii) *Seeing Uche for the first time*, I was repelled by his personality.

You may ask: "What causes dangling modifiers?" A number of factors are responsible for this problem. First, the wrong use of passive voice may be responsible, as in:

- (i) \**Running to the notice board*, her Use of English grade was seen.
- (ii) \**Looking tired*, a bed rest was needed.

This does not, however, mean that we should avoid the use of the passive. There are situations when the passive is the only structure adequate to express a point of view, as in:

Seen for the first time, Mr. Okey was often believed to be unapproachable.

Second, participles beginning a sentence may become dangling modifiers, as all the examples above reveal. But again, you must bear in mind that there are some *-ing* words conventionally used in an impersonal sense. Typical among them are: *assuming*, *considering*, *supposing*, *admitting*, etc. Because these words imply:

one {  
 assumes  
 considers  
 supposes  
 admits

they do not become dangling modifiers, as in:

- (i) *Supposing that the lecturer fails to solve the problem*, it is logical to believe that the problem is a difficult one.

- (ii) Admitting that the lady jilted her lover, *it* is obvious that the lover must have given the lady some false hopes.

Although *it* in the two sentences does not logically relate to the participles *supposing* and *admitting*, the participles are taken to mean:

if one  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{supposes} \\ \text{admits} \end{array} \right\}$

Consequently, the sentences are not ungrammatical.

Third, past participle verb phrases may dangle, as in:

- (i) *Caught red-handed with the stolen car, his shame knew no bounds.*  
 (ii) *Arrested and put in prison, his mother's heart was broken.*  
 (iii) *\*Sneered at by the other children, life seemed quite unpleasant for her.*

Again, you notice that there is no logical relationship between the following pairs:

- (a) *Caught* and *his shame*  
 (b) *arrested* and *mother's heart*  
 (c) *sneered* and *life*

because the subject of the sentence cannot perform the actions indicated by the past participles. Thus, we revise the sentences to read:

- (i) *Caught red-handed with the stolen car, he became very ashamed.*  
 (ii) *His arrest and imprisonment broke his mother's heart.*  
 (iii) *Sneered at by the other children, she felt that life was quite unpleasant.*

We must warn that it is not enough that the performer or undergoer of an action be named somewhere in the sentence. It must be named as the *subject* of the sentence. Failing in this, we get a dangling modifier, as in:

Caught red-handed with the stolen car, the policeman arrested Uche.

Although the sentence is quite probable, it is not the *policeman* who



was caught red-handed. Therefore, the sentence dangles. (Context, we retain).

Caught red-handed with the stolen car, Uche was arrested by the policeman.

The relationship is now achieved. But suppose we want to give the policeman and not Uche the prominence in the sentence above, "what do we do?" In such a case, we use a clause instead of a verb phrase, as in:

Since Uche was caught red-handed with a stolen car, the policeman arrested him.

Fourth, infinitive phrases sometimes dangle, as in:

- (i) *To prepare for an examination*, concentration is essential.
- (ii) *To have a successful party*, good food is always useful.
- (iii) *To understand Africa*, Nigeria must be studied first.

The same principle which make the examples we have examined earlier dangle also applies here. In order to relate the infinitive phrase and the subject of the sentence, we revise thus:

- (i) *To prepare for an examination*, a man needs to concentrate.
- (ii) *To have a successful party*, one ought to provide good food.
- (iii) *To understand Africa*, one must first of all study Nigeria.

Finally, adjective phrases sometimes occur as dangling modifiers.

- (i) *Angry at the students*, punishments were given.
- (ii) *Dissatisfied with the arrangements*, a riot broke out.
- (iii) *Furious at his words*, violence erupted.

They may be thus revised:

- (i) *Angry at the students*, the lecturer punished them.
- (ii) *Dissatisfied with the arrangements*, the crowd rioted.
- (iii) *Furious at his words*, the women started to throw stones at everything in sight.

We have thus far discussed the most important causes of dangling modifiers. It is now up to you to try as much as possible to avoid the error by making sure that modifying phrases always relate logically to the subject of the main sentence. Now, do the following exercises:

### Exercise 6.1

1. Correct the following sentences:

- (i) Having entered his car, the windows were immediately opened.
- (ii) To travel in comfort, money is essential.
- (iii) To get thirty miles to a gallon, moderate speed must be maintained.
- (iv) After attacking my lateness, I was dismissed.
- (v) When ten years old, Uche's father taught him driving.
- (vi) Once relaxed, Ada's back felt better.
- (vii) While turning the book, the ashtray spilt on his book.
- (viii) Listening to the concert with rapt attention, Beethoven seemed more than ever a magnificent composer.
- (ix) Working too hard and earning too little, my waist is beginning to trouble me again.
- (x) Leaving his flat in a violent temper, her **fury** mounted higher as she thought of his insolence.
- (xi) To smoke safely, filters must be used.
- (xii) When entering the theatre, the clothes of the audience surprised him.
- (xiii) To work as a pianist, constant practice is of great importance.
- (xiv) After seeing the dentist, his teeth stopped aching.
- (xv) Entering the lecture room, his cigarette hung limply between his lips.
- (xvi) Switching on the light, a mouse scurried across the room.
- (xvii) Stupefied by the implications of the remarks, the lecturer was unable to answer.
- (xviii) Having resided all his life in the village, Lagos seemed a bit terrifying at first.
- (xix) Resentful at being passed over again, a plan for revenge began to grow in his mind.

### 6.5 AMBIGUITY

A sentence is ambiguous if it signals more than one meaning. Although creative writers may be deliberately ambiguous, ambiguity is a feature of bad writing, and, should, therefore, be avoided. The main cause of ambiguity is misplacement of words, phrases, and

clauses in a sentence. It is, therefore, important, that you should make sure that your words, phrases, and clauses are correctly placed in your sentences so that your sentences can convey the actual meaning you intend to communicate. Ambiguity detracts your reader's attention from what is being said and directs it to the sloppiness of the expression.

Let us now examine the rules you have to observe to avoid ambiguity.

First, place modifying adverbs next to the words they modify. Adverbs to be particularly watched are:

*only, early, almost, hardly, scarcely, just, even, quite, etc.*

For instance, the following are ambiguous:

- (i) I *only* narrated what I had seen.
- (ii) People who saw the play *frequently* praised it.

The first sentence may mean: "Either *I* did the telling or I narrated what I saw and nothing else." If the first meaning is implied, the adverb should come before the subject *I*, as in:

*Only* I narrated what I had seen.

Similarly, in the second sentence, the adverb may modify either *saw* to imply *seeing it many times* or *praise* to mean *praising it often*. If the first meaning is implied, then the adverb is placed before the verb *saw* to give: "People who *frequently* saw the play praised it." On the other hand, if the second meaning is intended, the adverb is placed at the end of the sentence: "People who saw the play praised it *frequently*."

Second, place modifying clauses and phrases immediately after their antecedent. A problem, however, arises in applying this rule. Ambiguity always arises when a modifying prepositional phrase and a relative clause have a common antecedent, as in:

The man in the train that has just moved.

Two meanings result. First, *the man moved*. Second, *the train moved*. Which is the meaning intended? How do we resolve this kind of ambiguity? Observe that what has caused the ambiguity is essentially the use of the relative pronoun *that* which accepts both human and non-human nouns. If we change the pronoun and replace it with one

appropriate to the antecedent we intend to communicate, the magic is performed.<sup>1</sup> Thus, we have:

- (i) the man in the train who has just moved (the man did the moving)
- (ii) the man in the train which has just moved (the train did the moving)

Alternatively, the relative pronoun *that* could be retained if the antecedents are different in number:

- (iii) *the men* in the train *that have* just moved (men did the moving as indicated by the plural *have*)
- (iv) *the man* in the *train that has* just moved (train did the moving as indicated by the singular *has*)

It is quite easy to lapse into this kind of ambiguity since English word order demands that when a prepositional phrase and a relative clause modify a single antecedent, the prepositional phrase must come before the relative clause. Such a rule accounts for this ambiguous sentence:

The face of the man *looking through the window which was cruel and sardonic* startled me.

In this particular case, it is better to recast the sentence thus:

The *cruel and sardonic* face of the man *looking through the window* startled me.

Third, make sure that a single pronoun does not refer to two males or two females or two things or two groups. Many writers try to resolve ambiguity resulting from this rule by using the crude structure: *he* (Oji); that is, putting in parentheses the antecedent implied. Let us take a look at this example:

Ada told her sister that *she* was not going to the market anymore.

You see that *she* may refer to either *Ada* or *sister*. To resolve the ambiguity, many of you use the crude structure:

<sup>1</sup> However, our rule does not work with the following typical sentences:

- (i) The trinket in the box that has just been polished.
- (ii) The boy with the girl that/who has just been punished.

Ada told her sister that she (Ada) was not going to the market anymore.

But you can resolve the problem using a more felicitous style:

When Ada realised that she was not going to the market anymore, she told her sister.

or

Ada told her sister not to go to the market anymore.

We have pointed out the major causes of the stylistic problem called *ambiguity*. It is hoped that if you observe the rules we have given, you will solve the problem of ambiguity. Now, do the following exercises, which included a review exercise.

### *Exercises*

1. Each of the following contains an ambiguity. Rewrite each sentence twice to express each possible meaning:

#### *Example*

- A. Elsie told her mother that she was losing her mind.
- (a) Fearing that she was losing her mind, Elsie confided in her mother.
  - (b) Elsie thought that her mother was losing her mind and told her so.
    - (i) Ada remarked to Ifeoma that she would look good with grey hair.
    - (ii) Before the tourists mingle with the natives, they should be inoculated.
    - (iii) He removed the stone from the cloth and washed it carefully.
    - (iv) Azu had to stay home with her little sister because she had been troublesome.
    - (v) The judge did not want to give Joe a heavy sentence because he was kind.
    - (vi) It was decided to turn on the light in the village square because it attracted many people from the neighbouring villages.
    - (vii) The lecturer wrote his name on the blackboard, and this amused the students very much.
    - (viii) When Dr. Obi caught his six-year-old son smoking a cigarette, he tried to be nonchalant.
    - (ix) When the eggs were served to the customers, they often looked green.

- (x) Ada told Eziaku that she would have to run the rest of the day.
- (xi) Vivian only reads the best in African Literature.
- (xii) I scarcely opened the door when his dog leaped at me.

2. Resolve the ambiguities in the following sentences:

- (i) I located the trouble with my television set in the laboratory.
- (ii) A scream tore through the house, waking the baby in bed with a cry.
- (iii) Columbus vowed as soon as he landed to claim the New World for Ferdinand and Isabella.
- (iv) When we visited foreign lands, we tried to learn their folklore when we spoke with the natives.
- (v) Letters can win friends that show personality and spirit.

3. Read the following passage carefully paying particular attention to the sentence structure and do the exercises at the end:

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organising its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and, accordingly, all experience hath shown, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are

accustomed. But, when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of these colonies, and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former systems of government.

(Thomas Jefferson, *Declaration of American Independence*).

1. The quoted passage is famous for its use of parallelism. Select the parallel structures in the passage.
2. Although the passage contains very long sentences, it does not bore. Describe the devices the author has used to make the passage interesting.
3. The first sentence of the second paragraph is contained in the preamble of the Nigerian Constitution. Using the sentence as a model, write the preamble of the Constitution of your Students' Union.
4. Determine the meaning of the following words from their contexts:

- (i) impel
- (ii) right
- (iii) unalienable
- (iv) prudence
- (v) transient
- (vi) usurpation
- (vii) evince
- (viii) despotism
- (ix) constrain
- (x) sufferance

Using your dictionary, find out whether there are apt synonyms that could be used in place of the words.

5. Comment on the author's choice of words.

## CHAPTER 7

# Punctuation

by

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Punctuation consists of a series of marks inserted to mark off words one from another either to show their grammatical relationship or to give emphasis to them. Some marks, such as the full-stop and the comma, merely indicate the length of a pause; others, like the question mark and exclamation mark, indicate inflexion of the voice; while signs for quotations and parentheses serve to bring external matter into the basic text.

### 7.1 THE BASIC RULES

The main purpose of punctuation is to help you to present your ideas clearly and effectively. To achieve this, punctuation marks must be used only when they are necessary. The following general rules about the use of punctuation marks may, therefore, be made:

1. Use as few punctuation marks as are necessary. Be able to justify each mark you use.
2. Do not use punctuation marks to compensate for bad sentence construction.

### 7.2 INDIVIDUAL TASTE

It is generally observed that no two people punctuate alike. This observation is broadly true because punctuation does not follow detailed rules so inflexible that they leave no room for the exercise of personal taste. Punctuation is, indeed, very much a matter of combined taste and common sense, though there are certain underlying principles you must observe if you are to be clearly understood. We shall in this chapter examine the underlying principles which govern the use of the most problematic punctuation marks in English. Meanwhile, it is important to present a table of all the punctuation marks in English as well as the symbols by which we know them.