

Awkward Sentences

Sometimes a sentence just doesn't sound right because it has a confusing and awkward structure. If you find yourself slowing down or stumbling over a certain sentence while reading aloud, you might need to rewrite the sentence and phrase it more clearly.

How to Fix Awkward Constructions

There is no single rule or technique to correct awkward phrasing. A writer must develop an "ear" for what sounds right and be willing to reword a sentence until it sounds smooth, clear, and direct. Sometimes the act of writing can overcomplicate what we want to say. With this in mind, pretend to describe your writing subject to a close friend. Notice how clear it sounds when simplified. Say it aloud, and then write it down. This is often a great fix for awkward sentences.

Awkward: Taking life a day at a time is how I think it should be done to be happy.

Better: Taking life one day at a time will make you happy.

A more methodical approach to fix an awkward sentence is to identify subject and verb, then cut the sentence down accordingly. Ask yourself, "What is this sentence about – what is the core subject?" (Choose a noun.) Then ask, "What is this subject doing?" (Choose a verb.) Try to choose a strong verb that conveys action, not a "be" verb.

Awkward: The fact that we don't eat a balanced diet is our biggest health problem and that we don't get enough exercise is also a big issue.

What is this sentence about? At first it seems it is about a bad diet, but then another important subject is tagged on the end – not enough exercise. So the sentence is about **poor diet and lack of exercise** (subject). What do these things do? We don't just want to say they "are" an issue. "Are" does not convey action. What do poor diet and lack of exercise do? They **contribute to** or **result in** or **cause** (possible verbs) our greatest health problems.

Better: Poor diet and lack of exercise contribute to our greatest health problems.

Here's another example.

Awkward: The article sums it up pretty well regarding what her plan is about.

What is this sentence about? **The article** (noun). What does the article do? (Notice the question doesn't ask for a weak verb—what the article “is.”) It “**sums up**” her plan. Is there a better verb than “sums up”? What about **summarizes**? What else do articles do? They **present** information (possible verbs).

Better: The article summarizes her plan well.

Also: The article presents an effective summary of her plan.

Avoid Word and Phrase Repetition

Sometimes writers latch onto a nice word or phrase and then wear it out. Two repeat offenders appear in this short paragraph: “successful implementation” and “democracy/democratic.”

America was the first country to **successfully implement** a **democracy** guaranteed by a constitution. The process was not easy and involved a lot of debate among the Founding Fathers, but eventually they were able to **successfully implement democratic** elections. The **successful implementation** of the Bill of Rights eventually brought reluctant colonies into the new **democracy**.

Instead, consider using synonyms (different words, same meaning) or simply a fresh approach to the same concept. Notice how the word “successful” is not used below; instead, the success is evident. Effective word choices essentially speak for themselves.

America was the first country to **implement** a **democracy** guaranteed by a constitution. The process was not easy and involved a lot of debate between the Founding Fathers, but eventually they were able to hold **democratic** elections. Passing the Bill of Rights eventually brought reluctant colonies into the new nation.

Avoid Clichés

Clichés are overused phrases that have become predictable and dull. When people read, they want to hear new and fresh language that provides an original point of view. Here are just a few examples of the many clichés.

Clichés are a dime a dozen.

Her words cut like a knife.

Beauty is skin deep.

I couldn't believe my eyes.

The room was as dark as a cave.

What goes around comes around.

Seeing is believing.

Avoid blind dates like the plague.

Avoid Excessive Intensifiers and Qualifiers

Intensifiers are words that attempt to add force or weight to a sentence, or “intensify” it. If these words are used too often, they can actually weaken and water-down the writing.

It is **really** amazing how intensifiers make sentences **very** cumbersome.

I am **so** glad I know how to avoid making this **extreme** mistake **so** often.

Qualifiers are words that indicate the limits of your claim. They are often appropriate and necessary, but too many make your writing sound wishy-washy.

Gun laws are **probably** a good idea **most of the time**.

Occasionally torture **might** be necessary **in some cases**.

For the most part it has been a **somewhat** good year.