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Ambiguities: Identifying and Correcting

> A man is walking down a hallway carrying a book in his hand. Suddenly, he drops the book. As he is leaning down to pick it up, another man in the hallway says, "It looks like that book escaped your grasp."

This kind of "dry" humor derives from **lexical ambiguity**, whereby we crack wise on a word with two definitions (or more). The joke plays on the two meanings of "grasp," i.e., the literal "to hold securely in one's hand" and the more conceptual or metaphorical "to fully understand or comprehend" (as a book). What makes the joke funny is the use of the both meanings of the word at the same time and in the same context. When we "get it," that is, when we understand the speaker's double meaning without any need of explanation, this *saying and understanding of two things at once* both surprises and gratifies us and makes us laugh (or smirk).

The quip also plays humorously on an **incongruity**. The word "escaped," denoting a capability ordinarily belonging only to human beings and animals capable of movement, is here applied to an inanimate thing such as a book.

You can see similar situations in jokes such as the following:

> What's the difference between Peyton Manning and a dollar?
>
> (pause)
>
> You can still get four quarters out of a dollar.

The joke here is that the word "quarters" can be understood as both a kind of money as well as a period of time in a football game.

The playful superimposition of the two meanings of a word, "grasp" in the first case and "quarters" in the second, is the stuff of humor, particularly puns. A certain shared cultural knowledge is also invoked. We have to know who Peyton Manning is to "get it."

This is what may be called **benign ambiguity**; it makes sport with the multiple definitions that can often be inherent in many words. But there's another kind of ambiguity, not so benign, that can bring trouble to our writing: **syntactic ambiguity**.

Syntactic Ambiguity

The trouble with syntactic ambiguity is that it makes the meaning of the sentence unclear. With no context to provide meaningful clues, consider the isolated sentence below:

> He read the letter to his son.

Did he read the letter *written* to his son or did he read the letter *aloud* to his son? This is not clear, and there is no humorous external context we can use to clarify the meaning as before. In situations like this, it can be aggravating for the readers and the author will likely lose their interest. Conceivably, we may read the sentence either way; however, we need to know what the writer actually *means*. Encountering **syntactic ambiguity** causes the audience to get confused rather than amused.

All hope is not lost! We can resolve this particular ambiguity by adding clarifying words. In this case, depending on what the authors means to say, either the word "written" or "aloud" may be used before the prepositional phrase, as shown below:

> He read the letter written to his son.
>
> He read the letter aloud to his son.

It also helps that most sentences are not so often isolated. Effective context clues may also provide sufficient clarity:

> When John collected the mail this morning, he found several letters written to various members of his family. Without stopping to think whether he should or not, he read the letter to his son.
>
> When John collected the mail this morning, he found a letter from his sister Joanne. While his son was busy making a sandwich, he read the letter to his son.

(Here, including the word "written" in the first passage, or "aloud" in the second, would be perhaps helpful but not necessary.)

Sometimes context clues are not sufficient, and this is something student writers should consider.

> Alex and his brother Nathan were arrested last week and charged with fraud and larceny for **selling** old, obsolete computer storage disks–which they advertised as "collector's items, rare digital artifacts"–from their garage **online**.

It might be nitpicky to quibble about which is which–is the garage or the selling "online"? An online garage! Conventional reality and common sense tell us it's the selling that is happening online, but the syntax actually leads us to think the garage is online!

As proof, check out the same sentence but with a physical location attached instead:

> . . . from their garage on West Avenue.

Troublesome syntactic ambiguities like this can occur in all sorts of ways, but there are a few specific identifiable "danger spots" that can be listed for students. It's safe to say that any time adverbs, adjectives, or prepositional modifiers are present there's a risk. Careful proofreading and reading the text out loud can often help detect the problems. A modifier may need to be moved closer to the thing it is modifying to make the meaning clearer. In Alex and Nathan's case, "online"–which can function either as an adverb or adjective–should be relocated to a position at least nearer to "selling." Readers will make no mistake that "online" is now operating as an adverb modifying "selling" when placed this way:

> Alex and his brother Nathan were arrested last week and charged with fraud and larceny for **selling** old, obsolete computer storage disks **online**–which they advertised as "collector's items, rare digital artifacts"–from their garage.

Pronoun Ambiguity

Another common place of ambiguity is **pronoun/antecedent ambiguity**. Pronouns are used to replace nouns in sentences to avoid repetition and clunky sentence structures. A *pronoun antecedent* is the noun (or nouns) the pronoun is taking the place of. It must be clear which preceding noun is the intended reference.

Consider:

> The Bolsheviks ultimately came to believe that the Trotskyites were too moderate in their approach to the revolution. They were unhappy about this and began a campaign of character assassination and exclusion that ultimately led to factional warfare.

Based on this sentence, it is unclear who "they" are and who was unhappy. Was it the Bolsheviks or the Trotskyites? It's ambiguous. The solution here would be to replace the pronoun with a noun or noun phrase. Remember that clarity is the most important aspect of writing.

Consider this similar example:

> Ellen argued with her mother over whether the money she'd given her was a loan or a gift.

Who gave whom the money is unclear from this syntax. It's true that mothers more often give their daughters money than the other way around, but that would only be a guess. What a writer *probably* means is not *clarity*.

Consider the following solution:

> Ellen argued with her mother over whether the money Ellen had given her was a loan or a gift.

Ah. Much better!

Serial Comma Ambiguity

Another trouble spot involves the Oxford comma, also known as the *serial* comma. The Oxford comma is the last comma in a list of three or more. Consider this example:

> Elvira served Albert his three favorite foods: Cobb salad, enchiladas**,** and vanilla custard.

Here, the comma after "enchiladas" is the Oxford comma. There is considerable controversy–and confusion–as to whether this comma is necessary. Indeed, there are some publishing style guides, such as AP style, that demand it be left out. The problem is that ambiguities can occur if it is omitted. Consider the following:

> Allen worships his sisters, Taylor Swift and the Princess of Wales.

The phrase "Taylor Swift and the Princess of Wales" in this sentence reads as an appositive, meaning it appears that Allen's sisters are Taylor Swift and the Princess of Wales. Although that would be very exciting, it's probably not true. The sentence intends to say there are at least four separate women whom Allen worships. Including the Oxford comma would clarify this:

> Allen worships his sisters, Taylor Swift, and the Princess of Wales.

Although the Oxford comma is fairly controversial in writing circles, a writer is more likely to cause ambiguity by *omitting* it than by including it.

Turn the page for a helpful exercise.

Exercise

The following list of syntactically ambiguous newspaper headlines was compiled by the Bucknell University Linguistics Department (Syntactically Ambiguous Headlines, Bucknell University). In the space following each headline, explain where the ambiguity lies, i.e., identify both the line's probable intended meaning and its alternative unintended meaning. (Do the best you can!)

1. Stolen Painting Found by Tree

2. Teacher Strikes Idle Kids

3. Enraged Cow Injures Farmer with Axe

4. Squad Helps Dog Bite Victim

5. Juvenile Court Tries Shooting Defendant

6. Killer Sentenced to Die for Second Time in 10 Years

7. Grandmother of Eight Makes Hole in One

8. Two Convicts Evade Noose, Jury Hung

9. Milk Drinkers are Turning to Powder

10. NJ Judge to Rule on Nude Beach