

# **Common Mistakes in Papers**

## The Writing Center

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### Most Common Mistakes in Papers

#### PROBLEM: WHO/WHOM VERSUS THAT/WHICH

Incorrect Sentence: Laura is the girl *that* is in my class.

Correct Sentence: Laura is the girl *who* is in my class.

*Why: Who/Whom are used when discussing people.  
That/Which are used when discussing things.*

#### PROBLEM: PREPOSITIONS AT THE END OF A SENTENCE

Incorrect Sentence: Laura is the girl who I have a class *with*.

Correct Sentence: Laura is the girl *with whom* I have a class.

*Why: Prepositions at the end of a sentence cause the reader to expect more information to come at the end of the sentence. Since the preposition is at the end of the sentence, then there is no more information for that sentence, so the sentence needs to be changed in order to be clearer.*

**\*Most Common Prepositions Used Incorrectly at the End of Sentences: with, at, in, on, for**

#### PROBLEM: PRONOUN REFERENCES

Incorrect Sentences:

I know that everyone has problems in *their* life, and *they* can be very hard to overcome.  
Jenny told the group how *she* would make *her* sister do things that *she* did not want to do.

Correct Sentences: I know that everyone has problems in *his/her* life, and those problems can be very hard to overcome.

Jenny told the group how *she* would make *her* sister do things that Jenny did not want to do.  
OR Jenny told the group how *she* would make *her* sister do things that Jenny's sister did not want to do.

*Why: Pronouns generally refer back to the last subject. In the first sentence example, a couple of clarity issues arise due to the pronoun*

references used. First, “everyone” is singular, and “their” is plural. In order to use proper pronouns, “their” must be changed to “his/her” (or a variation, e.g., “his” or “her”). Also, “they” technically refers back to everyone; however, “they” is meant to refer to “problems.” Therefore, “they” should be changed to “those problems” (using “those” is okay because “those” is discussing “problems,” which has been mentioned previously in the sentence). In the second sentence example, the first “she” refers to Jenny, the “her” also refers to Jenny, and the second “she” refers to Jenny’s sister. The second sentence example is not technically incorrect if the last “she” refers to Jenny’s sister, but the pronoun references used in the sentence do raise the question of whether Jenny forced her sister to do things that Jenny did not want to do or things that Jenny’s sister did not want to do. The question is raised because there are a great deal of female pronouns used in the sentence. In order to make the sentence clearer, the sentence should be changed to one of the correct sentence examples listed.

#### PROBLEM: PARALLELISM WITHIN STATEMENTS

##### Incorrect Sentences:

Eric ran, jumped, and was walking to class.

Terry thought that she would call her friend to discuss John’s personal problems and she needs help on her algebra homework.

##### Correct Sentences:

Eric ran, jumped, and walked to class.

Terry thought that she would call her friend to discuss John’s personal problems and that she needed help on her algebra homework.

*Why:* In the first incorrect sentence example, “ran” and “jumped” are active past tense verbs, but “was walking” is a passive past tense verb. In order to make the first incorrect sentence example correct, all verbs must be changed to the same verb form. Therefore, changing “was walking” to “walked” corrects the sentence. In the second incorrect sentence example, the sentence is unclear as to whether Terry thought that she or her friend “needed help on her algebra homework.” By changing the sentence to include the second “that,” the sentence is made clearer. The sentence is clearer because the sentence demonstrates that Terry thought that she needed help.

#### PROBLEM: CHANGE IN PERSON FROM “I” TO “YOU” TO “ONE”

*Why: When reading an essay, it is easier for a reader understand an essay when s/he knows to whom or about what the author is discussing. If an author chooses to write using "I," then the reader is lead to believe that the essay is about personal opinions and thought. When the reader reads an essay that continually says, "You must be nice to others," then the reader assumes that the writer is speaking directly to the reader. When a sentence like, "One must realize the importance of being nice," is written, the reader sees the sentence as a point of fact or distance. When an essay uses more than one person ("I," "You," or "One"), several complications can occur. First, the writer loses essay credibility in the eyes of the reader because the reader is unsure of whether the writer is even sure of what has been written. Second, change in person also causes a change in the mood of the essay and in the audience of the essay. In order to avoid complications with an essay, the choice of person used throughout the paper should remain the same.*

**PROBLEM: THESIS STATEMENTS**

*Why: Thesis statements are found in the introductory paragraph and outline the main points of the essay. The thesis statement should be a sentence that introduces the purpose of the entire essay. A reader should be able to read the thesis statement alone to know exactly what the essay contains.*

**PROBLEM: TOPIC SENTENCES**

*Why: Topic sentences suggest the central thought of a paragraph. Topic sentences are similar to thesis statements because, as a thesis statement suggests the main points of an essay, topic sentences state the main point of the paragraph. Topic sentences are generally found at the beginning of a body paragraph in order to inform the reader about the topic to be addressed in the paragraph. Without topic sentences, a paragraph is more likely to be full of rambling, jumbled sentences.*

**PROBLEM: TRANSITION STATEMENTS**

*Why: Transition statements are used to guide a reader from one paragraph to the next. Without transition statements, an essay is full of separate paragraphs that are united solely by the fact that*

*each of the paragraphs is included in the same essay. In an effort to maintain the flow of the paper, and, in turn, the train of thought of the reader, transition statements are necessary to the clarity and unity of an essay.*

### PROBLEM: FUNCTION OF A CONCLUSION

*Why: Conclusions are used to end an essay, i.e., to sum up the points of an essay in a few sentences. Conclusions also contain some restatement of the thesis. The purpose of a conclusion in an essay is to tell the reader what was just said in the previous paragraphs. Introducing new ideas into a conclusion is not a good idea because new ideas cause the reader to feel as though the essay is not finished because there are more points to be addressed.*

\*Here is the most general outline possible for an essay:

1. The **introduction** tells the audience what the essay includes.
  - The **thesis statement** is typically found at the end of the introduction.
2. Body paragraphs go more in depth on each topic.
  - Topic sentences** are used to clarify the specific purpose of the paragraphs.
  - Transition statements** are used to guide the reader between topics.
3. The **conclusion** restates the content of the essay.
  - The thesis statement is usually restated.

### PROBLEM: UNDERSTANDING THE TRUE MEANING OF REVISION

*Why: Revision is not just a process of going through an essay to fix only the errors marked by the grader. Many graders do not mark all errors in a paper. Many graders also do not mark all concerns with the content of the essay. The process of actual revision involves three tasks: Rethink, Rework, and Rewrite. The writer should not only think about the errors marked by the grader, but should also think about any other errors found in the paper and about the content and flow of the essay. Once the writer has thought about how to make corrections, the writer should rework the essay in order to make sure that any changes do not change the content or clarity of the paper in a way that is unwanted by the writer. The process of revision even involves the possibility that the writer should rewrite parts of or the entire essay in order to correct issues with content, clarity, unity, organization, and grammar.*