

The Proof Angel Summary of

Grammar & spelling: March 2014

Why dangling and misplaced modifiers matter

This is classic terminology to scare people. You don't really need to remember what it means. Just remember to look out for the comic effects they create.

There is a popular view these days that grammar & punctuation don't matter. Dangling and misplaced modifiers are good examples of why we really do need a framework to make sure our message clear. It is just a little unfortunate that it is so hard to explain in a snappy phrase.

It is much easier to illustrate. My English teacher's favourite example was:

Wearing my pink frilly party dress, the big red bus came over the hill.

She used to chortle away about how a big red thing like a bus should know better than to wear anything pink. But that was before combinations of pink/orange/red became fashionable.

Of course it should be:

I was wearing my pink frilly party dress when the big red bus came over the hill.

This post has some good examples of what goes wrong and how it can be fixed:

<http://ow.ly/vEliI>

The real message is simple. Read through what you have written & think whether other people will understand what you mean.

Some more dangling problems

An introductory clause can be a useful ploy. It sets the scene, varies the pace, or reminds the reader of a relevant point.

They also cause problems.

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It is all too easy to leave something dangling, with confusing or comic results. You need to make sure everything agrees with the right thing so we can tell what you are trying to modify. The trouble is that it can be very hard to spot the problem in your own writing. It is a classic time for reading what you mean, not what you have written. Your readers don't have the benefit of knowing what you mean.

Here is a collection of examples for the New York Times:

http://afterdeadline.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/01/07/danglers-ahead/?_r=1

The comma and the introductory phrase

The comma is a complicated thing. There are a lot of rules: I have a book that numbers 17 rules, but it all depends how you count them.

Here is a post about how commas behave near introductory phrases:

<http://www.copyediting.com/five-questions-using-introductory-phrase-commas>

How commas make a difference

Punctuation is such a small thing, isn't it? Just a few dots & dashes.

But the placing of a comma can make a huge difference to your sentence. Here are some good examples where people clearly don't mean what they have written:

<http://ow.ly/vEkMm>

Common errors and how to avoid them

If you have resolved to make your writing better in 2014, here is a post that will help. The title of "Things everyone has to stop saying in 2014" is a bit dictatorial, but the content has the right objective:

<http://www.ragan.com/WritingEditing/Articles/47806.aspx>

We need more plain language out there, set out logically. That way we can so we can understand it quickly & move on to something else. Unless we are wallowing in the beauty of what has been said, of course.

How to analyse a sentence

I went to an old fashioned school, & my English teacher loved this sort of thing. At least one homework a week was sentence analysis. It is one of those skills that seems pointless at the time, but it equips you for sorting out all sorts of trouble. It helps you spot quickly what should agree with what, whether you mean who or whom, & host of other things. Give it a try!

<http://languagelog ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=9431>

Capital letters

The main cause of the overuse of upper case is the idea that they should be used for important words. Unless you are writing a heading, forget that.

Capital letters should be used:

1. At the beginning of a sentence.
2. For a name of a specific person or thing. Until the 17th century, we used a capital for all nouns, as they still do in German. Fashion changed, and common nouns like dog & cat were demoted. We use upper case when there is only one, like Kensington High Street, not when we are talking about high streets in general.
3. In a legal document to signify a term with a special meaning in the document. The first time you mention it write it out in full, then put the term to be used in brackets. After that, each time you use that word it has a capital letter. For example at the beginning of a contract you might name one of the parties as Bloggs & Co Ltd (the Company). Then for the rest of the document you don't have to write out the full name, just put "The Company will supply..."

How to use old verbs

I suspect this won't be on the list of the most popular posts, but it might be useful for anyone who is working on historical dialogue or a traditional hymn. I wonder how long it is since they stopped teaching how to use thee & thou in schools? Anyway, for those who have the need & anyone who is curious, here is how it works:

<http://www.dailywritingtips.com/verbs-with-thou-and-thee/>

More in the Oxford comma debate

Some people get very hot under the collar about this one. I'm not sure why. Punctuation is there to help us understand the sentence, so why don't we just get on with putting commas in the right place to make sense?

Anyway, here are some examples of how it can get confusing.

<http://mentalfloss.com/article/33637/best-shots-fired-oxford-comma-wars>

How to use the semi-colon

The semi-colon causes a lot of confusion.

It runs a close second to the apostrophe in the race to be the least understood punctuation mark. And that is a shame. The purpose is to help the reader along by linking ideas.

The rules are surprisingly simple.

Use 1: Drawing our attention to a connection between two related statements

The fundamental point to remember is that the two statements must be complete sentences. An alternative would be to join the two with the conjunctions "and" or "but".

This gives us several useful tricks:

- It is good style to avoid starting a sentence with a number. You can do this by putting the number after a semi-colon. Remember this only works if the two sentences have related ideas, for example:
 - There has been an outbreak of flu; 20 people have been admitted to hospital this morning.
- If your paragraph is made up of very short sentences, linking two of them with a semi-colon can improve the flow of the text. Punchy text has its place, but it can be disjointed.
- A long sentence can be divided with a semi-colon. This will keep the connection between the ideas, but make reading easier.

Use 2: Lists

If the items in your list form groups, mark the groups off with semi-colons. The items in an ordinary list are separated with commas, so something else is needed to mark the categories to avoid confusion. An alternative would be to use bullet points & indent the sub-lists, but that isn't always possible, particularly in formal writing.

Comparing the two styles:

1. Please tell the Doctor if you have a family history of drug or alcohol abuse; have kidney, heart, or liver disease; are pregnant or nursing; or are undergoing treatment for a psychiatric disorder.
2. Please tell the Doctor if you:
 - Have a family history of drug or alcohol abuse.
 - Have kidney, heart, or liver disease.
 - Are pregnant or nursing.
 - Are undergoing treatment for a psychiatric disorder.

Finally, here is a passage from *The Medusa and the Snail* by Lewis Thomas:

"It is almost always a greater pleasure to come across a semicolon than a period. The period tells you that that is that; if you didn't get all the meaning you wanted or expected, anyway you got all the writer intended to parcel out and now you have to move along. But with a semicolon there you get a pleasant little feeling of expectancy; there is more to come; to read on; it will get clearer."

Consonant doubling

Many of us find it difficult to remember when we should double a consonant. That is a pretty scary topic as consonants form the majority of the alphabet - all letters other than a, e, i, o, & u. The key is to think about the length of the vowel immediately before the consonant in question.

Where a vowel is short, a double consonant is needed. Compare the following pairs of words:

- Planning v Planing
- Better v Beta
- Bitter v Biter
- Hopping v Hoping
- Supper v Super

Unfortunately, it isn't quite that straightforward:

1. It helps if you think in a northern accent, for example grass, class, & staff
2. Some consonants rarely double, eg h, j, k (except in trekker). As is often the way, q, x, y are also on this list of exceptions.
3. Some use an auxiliary consonant instead, as in lack or cadge.
4. There are a few exceptions, but they are mainly in one group: all, ball, & hall.