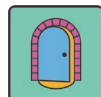## 28.11 Sentence Doctor

Use this exercise to *diagnose* possible sentence problems in your own writing as you edit, and then *prescribe* a possible remedy or correction you can use.

Background

How do you correct an error if you don't know it's there? And how do you fix it if you don't know what the best remedies are, or if your sentences don't look anything like the ones in your guidebook? Like careful physicians, advanced writers learn to look for symptoms or other signs that help us locate possible problems, diagnose common errors, and identify a reasonable solution.

Note about generative artificial intelligence: The advent of sophisticated grammar checkers and generative artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT or Bard *might* mean that you have less need to learn how to fix your own sentences. If you are writing something not very important or complex, a chatbot fix is likely to be correct (if not very lively). If you're working on writing that is more important to you, consider using a Chatbot Option to get *assistance* while you continue to *improve your learning*.

Take action

Select your focus area(s): Choose one or two of the common sentence problems listed in below that you think you are most likely to run into.

Investigate risky symptoms: Copy/paste 3-4 *possible* problem-sentences. Remember that not all long sentences are run-ons, and not all single commas are errors; your goal is to focus your attention in places with higher risk of problems.

- Chatbot option: Input some of your text into a chatbot and ask it to boldface any sentences that have errors without fixing or labeling any of those errors.
- Check your own understanding: Can you tell what the errors might be?

Diagnose each sentence: What evidence do you have that there's an error or not?

- Chatbot option: Input some of your text into a chatbot and ask it to boldface any sentences with errors and tell you what the name or type of error is, without fixing any of the errors.
- Check your own understanding: Can you see how you might improve the sentences?

Propose a remedy for at least one sentence: What's one way you could improve it? Remember that there are always multiple ways to improve a sentence.

- Chatbot option: Input your new sentence into a chatbot and ask if it has any corrections or alternatives to suggest.
- Check your own understanding: Do you agree with the advice? Why or why not?

Identify something you could learn more about by looking at a print or online style guide, if you wanted to gain more sentence knowledge.

Don't forget to add your reflective writing when you finish.

Run-on, comma splice, or fused sentence

- Investigate symptoms or problem areas
  - Any particularly long sentence
  - Any sentence with a single comma in the middle
  - Any sentence with several pronouns (he . . . he . . . he . . . or they . . . they . . .)
- Diagnose problems
  - Locate subject-verb pairs: if you spot more than one *she verb . . . she verb* pair, you might have a problem
  - NOTE: Sentences with a conjunction (*and, but, so, after, while, although*) between parts may be correct
- Propose a remedy
  - Create separate sentences; test by having each one start with subject-verb
  - Add a semi-colon between core sentences
  - Use a coordinating conjunction like *and* or *but*
- Learn more: check a usage or style guide
  - Semi-colons and colons
  - Coordinating conjunctions
  - Subordinating conjunctions
  - Subordinate clauses

Sentence fragment

- Investigate symptoms or problem areas
  - Any particularly short sentence
  - Any sentence that starts with an "-ing" word
  - Any sentence that starts with *Although*, *After*, *Because*, or another subordinating conjunction
  - Any sentence that starts with a phrase like *For example the X* or *Such as X.*

- Diagnose problems
  - Underline any subject+verb pairs
  - Make sure the first verb is real (not a "verbal" ending with *-ing* or *-ed*; if the verb is the first word, it's risky
  - If a conjunction starts the sentence, it's risky unless you see two subject-verb pairs
  - NOTE: A short sentence that starts with subject+verb is often correct
- Propose a remedy
  - Join the short sentence to the previous sentence with a comma or colon
  - Revise to start the sentence with a strong subject+verb pair
- Learn more: check a usage or style guide
  - Semi-colons and colons
  - Coordinating conjunctions
  - Subordinating conjunctions
  - Gerunds and participles

Comma errors

- Investigate symptoms or problem areas
  - Any sentence that starts with something other than a name or pronoun
  - Any sentence with a conjunction such as *and*, *but*, *so*, or *after*, *since*, or *when*
  - Any sentence with just one comma
- Diagnose problems
  - Check if you have an introductory word (*Also*, *However*) or a short phrase before your main subject starts
  - Check if you have coordinating conjunction (*and*, *but*, or, *so*) or a clause that is subordinated with after, since, when or a similar conjunction
  - Check if there's a descriptive phrase, *like this one here*, that you could put parentheses around and still make sense
  - NOTE: Some short sentences may not need commas in order to be clear
- Propose a remedy
  - Add a comma after an introductory word or phrase, right before the main subject+verb pair
  - Add a comma before *and*, *but*, *so* (not after!)
  - Add a comma after the whole clause that begins with a subordinating conjunction clause (*After*+subject+verb), putting the comma right before the next subject-verb pair

- Use a pair of commas the way you'd use parentheses around a descriptive phrase
- Learn more: check a usage or style guide
  - Introductory phrases
  - Transition words or phrases
  - Coordinating conjunctions
  - Subordinating conjunctions
  - Restrictive and non-restrictive phrases

Vague pronoun

- Investigate symptoms or problem areas
  - Any sentence or long phrase that begins with *He*, *She*, or *They*
  - Any sentence or long phrase that begins with *This*, *That*, *It* or *It's*
- Diagnose problems
  - Look at the previous sentence: does it name only one person/group that the current *He*/*She*/*They* start could be referring to?
  - Look at the previous sentence: does it describe only one specific event or item that *This* or *It* could refer to?
  - NOTE: Sentences that include *This*+noun are often correct
- Propose a remedy
  - If there is possible confusion, use the name rather than the pronoun
  - Add a noun after *This*: *This* table, *This* situation, *This* proposal
  - If you are referring to a complex idea, use several words to precisely identify the idea: *The government's handling of the epidemic* was . . . , or *Our first-place finish* revealed that . . .
- Learn more: check a usage or style guide
  - Pronouns
  - Antecedents
  - Concrete vs. abstract nouns

Inactive sentences

- Investigate symptoms or problem areas
  - Any sentence with an *is*, *was*, *are*, or *were* verb
  - Any sentence with low-action verbs such as *has*/*have*, *seem*, *make*, or *say*
- Diagnose problems
  - Identify the subject or actor in the sentence and ask yourself, "What did they do?"

- Identify a hidden verb—look for an *-ed* word such as repaired→repair or an *-ing* word such as breaking→broke—and ask yourself, "Who did this?"
    - NOTE: Some sentences need to describe a steady state (It *was* hot) or need to focus on the situation more than the actor (The election *was* rigged)
- Propose a remedy
    - Try revising the sentence by putting the actor and the action close to the start; you may be able to leave out some words
    - Imagine the actual scene and focus on what happened or changed: select a new vivid verb to convey the exact action
- Learn more: check a usage or style guide
    - Passive voice
    - Auxiliary verbs
    - Gerunds and participles
    - Nominalization

Reflect to learn and connect

Finish with a note about how you could *diagnose* and *remedy* one other sentence problem not listed in the table. (Option: You could share your strategy with other students to expand each other's knowledge.)

- You might choose a usage error you make frequently or a style challenge that's important for this document (such as using formal language or varying your sentence structure).
- You could choose an error from Lunsford and Lunsford's "20 Most Common Errors" list: word errors such as an "its/it's" or "there/their/they're" confusion, missing citation, punctuation error with a quotation, unnecessary or missing capitalization, unnecessary shift in verb tense, unnecessary or missing apostrophe, or poorly integrated quotation. (To learn more about the Top 20, see Chapter 11, Editing in Context.)
- You could identify symptoms or signs that you can continue to look for that would help you identify *possible* areas of concern. What would be one way you could fix or improve a sentence if you found a problem?

Explore related exercises

Final Four Proofreading Moves, Power Sentences, Write the Problem