

# Confusing Sentences Made Clear

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# Unclear adjectives

## *Problematic sentence:*

Dr. Wang's lab provided metastatic cells, assays, and reagents.

## *Solutions:*

Dr. Wang's lab provided assays, reagents, and **metastatic cells**.

Dr. Wang's lab provided metastatic cells; assays; and reagents.

# Unclear adjectives

## *Problematic sentence:*

Our friend's fish tank contained blue marbles, fish, and "no fishing" signs.

## *Solutions:*

Our friend's fish tank contained fish, "no fishing" signs, and blue marbles.

Our friend's fish tank contained several blue items: marbles, fish, and "no fishing" signs.

# Misplaced phrases

## *Problematic sentence:*

The patient had severe leg cramps after running for four years.

## *Solution:*

For four years, the patient had severe leg cramps after running.

# Missing or unclear words and phrases

## *Problematic sentence:*

After studying the map, the labyrinth seemed less daunting.



## *Solutions:*

After studying the map, **Theseus** found the labyrinth less daunting.

After **Theseus** studied the map, the labyrinth seemed less daunting.

# Missing or unclear words and phrases

## *Problematic sentence:*

In addition to the Western blotting results, fluorescence microscopy showed unusual accumulations of protein.

## *Solutions:*

Western blotting and fluorescence microscopy showed unusual accumulations of protein.

Like Western blotting, fluorescence microscopy showed unusual accumulations of protein.

# Missing or unclear words and phrases

## *Problematic sentence:*

Similar to the results of prior studies, most patients in our cohort experienced shortness of breath after drug administration.

## *Solutions:*

Similar to the results of prior studies, the results of our current study showed that most patients experienced shortness of breath after drug administration.

Most patients in our cohort experienced shortness of breath after drug administration. This finding was consistent with the results of prior studies.

# Missing or unclear words and phrases

## *Problematic sentence:*

In addition to his dragon-identification manual, the knight packed a box of magic potions and a bag of apples, which had been given to him by the king.





# Missing or unclear words and phrases

## *Problematic sentence:*

In addition to his dragon-identification manual, the knight packed a box of magic potions and a bag of apples, which had been given to him by the king.

## *Solutions:*

In addition to his dragon-identification manual, the knight packed a box of magic potions, as well as a bag of apples that had been given to him by the king.

In addition to his dragon-identification manual, the knight packed two items that had been given to him by the king: a box of magic potions and a bag of apples.

# Missing or unclear words and phrases

## *Problematic sentence:*

The patients received chemotherapy, radiotherapy, and immunotherapy, which significantly shrunk their tumors.

## *Solutions:*

The patients received chemotherapy, radiotherapy, and immunotherapy; all three significantly shrunk their tumors.

The patients received chemotherapy, radiotherapy, and immunotherapy, the last of which significantly shrunk their tumors.

# Incomplete comparisons

*Problematic sentence:*

The fireworks show was much better.

*Solution:*

The fireworks show over the lake was much better than the one over the parking lot.



# Incomplete comparisons

*Problematic sentence:*

Patients treated with cisplatin survived longer.

*Solution:*

Patients treated with cisplatin survived longer than those treated with radiation did.

# Unclear comparisons

*Problematic sentence:*

John likes Amy better than James.

*Solutions:*

John likes Amy better than he likes James.

John likes Amy better than James likes Amy.

# Unclear comparisons

## *Problematic sentence:*

The caverns in New Mexico had more bats than Missouri.



## *Solutions:*

The caverns in New Mexico had more bats than the caverns in Missouri had.

There were more bats in the caverns in New Mexico than in the entire state of Missouri.

# Subject-verb disagreement

*Problematic sentence:*

The tray of slides were overfilled.

*Solution:*

The **tray** of slides **was** overfilled.

# Subject-verb disagreement

## *Problematic sentence:*

Using this immunocompetent mouse models, we expect to enhance our understanding of the disease.

## *Solutions:*

Using **this** immunocompetent mouse **model**, we expect to enhance our understanding of the disease.

Using **these** immunocompetent mouse **models**, we expect to enhance our understanding of the disease.



# Unclear groupings of items

## *Problematic sentence:*

For the picnic, we packed sandwiches, boxes of fruit, vegetables, and crackers, cakes, and sodas.



## *Solution:*

For the picnic, we packed sandwiches; boxes of fruit, vegetables, and crackers; cakes; and sodas.

# Unclear groupings of items

## *Problematic sentence:*

Your risk of liver cancer is higher than average if you have chronic hepatitis C infection, inherited metabolic disease, including hemochromatosis, glycogen storage disease, porphyria cutanea tarda, or non-alcoholic fatty liver disease.

## *Solution:*

Your risk of liver cancer is higher than average if you have chronic hepatitis C infection, inherited metabolic disease (including hemochromatosis, glycogen storage disease, and porphyria cutanea tarda), or non-alcoholic fatty liver disease.

# Misplaced or missing commas

*Sentence without commas:*

Drummers who practice after school will get to perform in the concert.

*Sentence with commas:*

Drummers, who practice after school, will get to perform in the concert.

# Misplaced or missing commas

## *Problematic sentence:*

All patients, who were under the age of 18 years, were excluded from our study.

## *Solution:*

All patients who were under the age of 18 years were excluded from our study.

# Takeaway messages

- Keep words close to the words they describe
- Clarify what is being compared
- Check for subject-verb agreement
- Use punctuation to clarify complex lists
- Sentences with commas around a clause: see if the sentence makes sense without the clause
- Check your work carefully, ask a colleague to read it, or send it to Scientific Publications

# Resources

- Strunk W Jr, White EB. *The Elements of Style* (any edition).
- <https://owl.purdue.edu>

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