

Fixing the “Awk”

Writers' Toolbox ... is a regular feature of Perspectives. In each issue, Professor Anne Enquist offers suggestions on how to teach specific writing skills, either in writing conferences or in class. Her articles share tools and techniques used by writing specialists working with diverse audiences, such as J.D. students, ESL students, and practitioners. Readers are invited to contact Professor Enquist at ame@seattleu.edu.

By Anne Enquist

Anne Enquist is the Associate Director of the Legal Writing Program at Seattle University School of Law in Seattle, Wash. She also serves as the Co-Director of Faculty Development and the Writing Advisor at the law school. She is a member of the national Board of Directors for the Legal Writing Institute and has served on the editorial board for the journal Legal Writing: The Journal of the Legal Writing Institute. Professor Enquist is co-author of The Legal Writing Handbook, 3d edition, and four books: Just Writing, Just Briefs, Just Memos, and Just Research.

In the good old days, when life was simple and, more to the point, when critiquing student writing was simple, professors would read their students' writing and, upon coming across a clunker sentence, write “awk” (short for “awkward”) in the margin and keep on reading. The lazy, figure-it-out-for-yourself part of me kind of misses those days. But even back then, I and many others suspected that if students had known how to fix these clunkers, they would have done so. Labeling a sentence as “awkward” simply put them on notice; it was shorthand for “there’s a problem here—do something about it.”

Since those days, we have moved beyond merely labeling student writing problems, and now many of us believe we also have a responsibility to help our students fix their clunkers. Unfortunately that is a lot harder to do than rubber-stamping “awkward sentence—needs revision” in the margins or adding it to one’s autotext. Going beyond “awk” requires taking the time to diagnose what made the sentence

a clunker and suggesting how the writer should approach revising it. Fortunately, there are a few predictable categories of clunkers, each with a couple of standard fixes.

Clunker Category 1—I’m Still Not Sure What I’m Trying to Say

The classic awkward sentence is the result of unfinished thinking. The writer is still groping toward an idea he or she intends to convey and the groping shows. This is not a huge problem at the draft stage; we’ve all had the experience of writing ourselves into understanding. It is a problem at the final product stage.

One way to help students fix this type of clunker sentence is to point out the hazy thinking (tactfully) and then nudge the writer toward clarifying his or her thoughts. A margin comment such as “I’ve read this sentence twice and I’m still not sure what you are trying to say; do you mean X or Y?” makes the point that readers will stumble over the sentence and that the writer has to turn his or her thought processes up a notch.

Another technique that I love to teach students who write the occasional garbled sentence is one that I chanced upon when fighting a mangled sentence in my own writing. After revising the same sentence over and over again, only to find that the sentence was getting worse, not better, I pushed back from the computer in frustration and said aloud in my office, “All I’m trying to say is _____.” And there it was. What came out of my mouth and filled in that blank was my point—nice, clean, simply stated. Somehow leaving the computer, tapping into oral rather than written language, and reminding myself that this was not a big deal (“All I’m trying to say”) freed my brain from whatever entanglements were hindering my prose.

Since then, I have taught the “All I’m trying to say” technique to dozens of students with good results.

“The classic awkward sentence is the result of unfinished thinking. The writer is still groping toward an idea he or she intends to convey and the groping shows.”

“ [Some] writers seem to be tone deaf when it comes to rhythm and natural emphasis in their prose. They don’t seem to ‘hear’ the problems when they read silently to themselves. ”

Invariably, what comes out to fill in that blank is a reasonably clear expression of the point they have been laboring to express. I’ve noticed that the technique allows them to unpack their ideas, toss out what is extraneous, zero in on their point, and state it simply, much as they would to another person in a conversation. Watching this process in office conferences has led me to add a few small refinements to the technique.

First, once a writer has captured a point in oral language, he or she might find it helpful to jot it down before returning to the computer. Doing so prevents the writer from being sucked back into the swamp of the old problem sentence. Second, the oral language that the writer used to fill in the blank may be a bit informal for the document at hand. The writer may need to take it up a smidge, but just a smidge; too much and some writers are right back where they started with an overwritten cumbersome sentence. Third, once the new clear sentence is inserted into the document, the writer should read it together with the preceding and subsequent sentences and, if necessary, revise all three sentences so that they flow.

Clunker Category 2—I’m Tone Deaf When It Comes to Writing

I wish I were a musical person, but I’m not. I would love to be able to sing on key, but when the Creator was passing around that particular talent I must have been out of the room. Some students also seem to have been absent when the knack for hearing how writing sounds was distributed. They may write sentences that are technically correct, but these writers seem to be tone deaf when it comes to rhythm and natural emphasis in their prose. They don’t seem to “hear” the problems when they read silently to themselves.

The embarrassingly easy way to help some of these students improve how their writing sounds is to either (a) read their writing aloud to them or (b) have them read their own writing aloud. Nineteen students out of 20 will hear the problem areas once they are read aloud. When I read their writing aloud to them, I emphasize the clunkers and speed bumps along the way so that they hear them. I then

encourage them to read their own writing aloud and with exaggerated emphasis. Otherwise, most of them will start off reading their own writing out loud but then get faster and softer until sotto voce has become silent reading. This tendency can undermine the whole technique. To counteract the temptation to slip into silent reading, I encourage them to stand up and read like they are making a proclamation. Yes, this makes for some rather humorous office conferences. The point is to hear where the writing is not working.

Once students have identified problem sentences and the specific bumps and thuds in those sentences, they can use a trial and error method toward revising—try this, read aloud, try that, read aloud, which is better?—which works just fine for many students. My preference, however, is that they take the time to learn two closely related principles about good sentence construction.

The two sentence construction principles I would add to their writing repertoire are the old → new pattern within a sentence and dovetailing between sentences. The old → new pattern in sentences is news to most law students. Somehow most of them have never heard or noticed the point that George Gopen dramatized for us at the last Legal Writing Institute conference in Seattle:¹ most sentences tend to begin with something that is already known to the reader (old information), and they end with the new point that the sentence contributes to the building line of thought (new information). The old → new pattern is not a rigid rule, but it conforms nicely to the linear progression characteristic of good prose.²

Sentence	
Old information	New information

¹ A videotape of George Gopen’s presentation is available through the Legal Writing Institute.

² George D. Gopen, *The Sense of Structure* 70–75 (2004) (discussing the “herald stress position” that produces a “forward lean” in sentences, as well as the limits of “topic changing”).

“They always look surprised and then a bit relieved when I describe my own writing struggles and the bliss of the breakthrough when it happens.”

Dr. Davis’s occupation as an obstetrician has shown
subject verb

a diminished ability to provide consistent care and
complement

guidance for her children.

If we pull out the subject/verb/complement unit, we can see that the basic structure of the sentence does not work.

Occupation has shown diminished ability

An occupation cannot show diminished ability.

Using the earlier approach, the writer should ask, “What’s the real action in this sentence?” The vague, mushy “has shown” is obviously not it. No one seems to be showing anything here. The closest thing we have here to a real action seems to be trapped in the noun phrase “diminished ability.”

Dr. Davis may be unable or less able to provide consistent care and guidance for her children because she is an obstetrician.

One possible revision, then, is “As an obstetrician, Dr. Davis may be less able to provide consistent care and guidance for her children.” That version would also put a real actor, Dr. Davis, in the subject slot.

Another possible revision would keep her occupation as the actor: “Dr. Davis’s occupation, obstetrician, may impair her ability to provide consistent care and guidance for her children.”

Another writer using the “all I’m trying to say” approach might revise the sentence this way: “Because Dr. Davis is an obstetrician and her profession is so demanding, she will not be able to give her children consistent care and guidance.” There’s more than one way to skin a clunker.

Obviously, not all clunker sentences fall neatly into these three categories, nor are the techniques for fixing clunkers limited to the few I’ve described. Students do find it helpful, though, when their professors share a few ideas about how to deal with some of the ordinary problems every writer faces, and they find it reassuring to know that they are not the only ones who struggle to express themselves clearly and effectively. They always look surprised and then a bit relieved when I describe my own writing struggles and the bliss of the breakthrough when it happens. Such conversations help to change the “isn’t this lonely and painful” atmosphere that clouds some people’s experience with writing and suggest that writing and revising can be a rewarding experience. Who knows, it might even be fun to fix the awkward.

© 2006 Anne Enquist