28

Structural Traps: Danglers, Parallelism, and Ambiguity

This chapter is a field guide to the constructions that ambush proficient writers: sentences that are grammatical in form yet defective in attachment, balance, or reference.

28.1 Dangling and misplaced modifiers

28.1.1 Danglers

A modifier "dangles" when its implied subject is absent from the sentence:

- ✗ *Having reviewed the file, the appeal was rejected.* (the appeal didn't review) → ✓ *Having reviewed the file, **the judge** rejected the appeal.*
- ✗ *At the age of six, my family emigrated.* → ✓ *When I was six, my family emigrated.*
- ✗ *To qualify for the discount, the form must be submitted by May.* → ✓ *To qualify for the discount, **you** must submit the form by May.*

Some danglers are sanctioned idioms — *speaking of, judging by, considering, given, assuming, strictly speaking*: ***Judging by** the noise, the party was a success* is fine.

28.1.2 Misplaced modifiers

Modifiers attach to the nearest plausible host — put them next to what they modify:

- ✗ *She served sandwiches to the guests on paper plates.* (guests on plates?) → ✓ *She served the guests sandwiches on paper plates.*
- ✗ *We saw a fox driving through the forest.* → ✓ *Driving through the forest, we saw a fox.*
- Squinting modifier: ✗ *Runners who train rarely get injured.* (rarely train, or rarely get injured?) → ✓ *Runners who rarely train get injured.* / *Runners who train get injured only rarely.*

28.2 Faulty parallelism

Coordinated items must share a grammatical shape. Readers use the first item as a template for the rest; breaking the template derails them.

- ✗ *She likes hiking, to swim, and reading novels.* → ✓ *She likes hiking, swimming, and reading novels.*
- ✗ *The job requires attention to detail, communicating clearly, and that you meet deadlines.* → ✓ *The job requires attention to detail, clear communication, and reliable delivery.*

- Correlatives must flank matching constituents: ✗ *She not only speaks French but also German.* → ✓ *She speaks not only French but also German.* Same for *either. . . or, neither. . . nor, both. . . and, whether. . . or*.
- Comparisons need comparable terms: ✗ *The rules of chess are more complex than checkers.* → ✓ *. . . than* ***those of*** *checkers.*
- Shared words must fit every branch: ✗ *The staff were informed of and trained in the new system* works (*of/in* both present); ✗ *He has and always will support the club* fails (*has support*?) → ✓ *He has always supported the club and always will.*

28.3 Ambiguity

28.3.1 Attachment ambiguity

The officer watched the man ***with binoculars****.* — who has the binoculars? *We discussed the proposal* ***to cut costs at Friday's meeting****.* — cutting at the meeting, or discussing at the meeting? Resolve by moving the modifier or splitting the sentence: *At Friday's meeting, we discussed the proposal to cut costs.*

28.3.2 Coordination scope

old men and women (old [men and women] or [old men] and women?); *Croatian history teachers* ([Croatian history] teachers or Croatian [history teachers]?). Repair with a hyphen (*Croatian-history teachers*), reordering (*women and old men*), or expansion (*teachers of Croatian history*).

28.3.3 Pronoun reference

- ✗ *When Ana met Clara, she was nervous.* — who? Repeat the noun or restructure: ✓ *Ana was nervous when she met Clara.*
- Vague *this/that/it/which* pointing at a whole clause: ✗ *Sales rose but returns doubled, which pleased no one.* — what exactly displeased? → ✓ *. . . , a combination that pleased no one* (anchor *this/which* to a summary noun: *this trend, this discrepancy*).
- ✗ *The city council refused the marchers a permit because they feared violence.* — *they*? Rewrite: ✓ *. . . because the council feared violence.*

28.3.4 Negation scope

All the candidates were not qualified — none, or not all? Prefer ✓ *None of the candidates was qualified* or ✓ *Not all the candidates were qualified.* Similarly *I didn't go because it was raining* — add a comma (*didn't go, because*) or rewrite (*It was the rain that kept me home / I went, but not because of the rain*).

28.4 Garden-path sentences

Some grammatical sentences force the reader to backtrack:

- *The horse raced past the barn fell.* (= The horse [that was] raced past the barn fell.)
- *The old man the boats.* (= The old [people] man [= crew] the boats.)
- *Fat people eat accumulates.* (= Fat [that people eat] accumulates.)

Real prose creates milder versions whenever a reduced relative or an omitted *that* invites the wrong first parse: *He warned the students taking the exam late arrivals would be barred* → add *that*: ✓ *He warned the students taking the exam* ***that*** *late arrivals would be barred.*

Style & Register

The cure for every trap in this chapter is the same discipline: read your sentence as a stranger would, one word at a time, asking at each point "what would I attach this to?" When in doubt, prefer the boring restructure to the elegant ambiguity.

Exercises

Exercise 28.1 Repair the modifiers

1. Flying over the valley, the villages looked like toys.
2. After marinating overnight, you can grill the chicken.
3. The tour includes a visit to the palace, which lasts two hours.
4. He nearly earned $100,000 last year. (he earned almost that amount — fix *nearly*)

Exercise 28.2 Restore parallelism

1. The course teaches how to draft, editing, and revision strategies.
2. We want either to expand into Asia or Europe.
3. Her lectures were witty, insightful, and never ran over time.
4. Cycling is better for the environment than to drive.

Exercise 28.3 Disambiguate

Give both readings, then rewrite to force each one.

1. Visiting relatives can be exhausting.
2. The chicken is ready to eat.
3. Flavio saw the tourist with the telescope.
4. Small business owners protested the new tax.