

Awk-word-ness: Avoiding Wordiness (and Other Issues) in Your Writing

Students coming into the Writing Place often say they want to work on wording or grammar during a session. When tutors try and specify this concern, students typically answer that “something isn’t quite right” or that the writing “feels awkward.” The vagueness involved in these responses indicates not only the issue of awkwardness in writing, but also the problem of defining and understanding it. What is awkward writing? And how can tutors help students revise awkward sentences?

Awkward sentences begin with word choices. Sometimes writers will choose too many words, not the right words, or use them with incorrect sentence structures. In general, awkward sentences develop when writers try to manage multiple ideas, especially when they are introducing new ones or prioritizing one over another. However, the concept of awkwardness is subjective because it involves both grammar AND style. Ultimately, there is no right way to correct awkwardness (Barton et al.).

Part I: Grammatical Categories of Awkwardness

Even though there are no quick-fixes for awkwardness, instructors have successfully defined grammatical categories of awkwardness. Typically, awkwardness occurs when writers confuse types of clauses, sentence structures, and parallel structures (Barton et al.). Do these terms sound like nonsense to you? Let’s look at the following awkward sentence as an example:

This article shows that the tradition of a Homecoming Queen should be young, good looking and have a perfect body, can be changed.¹

1. Type of clause

The writer has confused two types of clauses. Either the sentence must be finite or nonfinite. In other words, it must read either:

1) This article shows the tradition that a Homecoming Queen should be young...

2) This article shows that the tradition of a Homecoming Queen being young...

2. Sentence structure

By using the preposition “of,” the writer makes the reader think the sentence will modify “tradition.”

1) Reader’s expectation: This article shows that the tradition of a Homecoming Queen [...] can be changed. (Meaning the general concept of Homecoming Queens should not exist.)

2) Writer’s intention: This article shows that the tradition of a Homecoming Queen being young, good looking, and having a perfect body, can be changed. (Meaning the specific tradition of beautiful Homecoming Queens should not exist.)

¹ All example sentences come from Barton et al.

3. Parallel structure

The writer does not use parallel structure in his/her list of Homecoming Queen qualities. Parallel structure means the parts of the sentence follow the same format. In this case, the list could either have multiple verbs, or one encompassing verb.

1) Multiple verbs: A Homecoming Queen should be young, look good, and have a perfect body. (Verbs: be, look, have)

2) One verb: A Homecoming Queen should have youth, good looks, and a perfect body. (Verb: have)

Exercise:

Let's see if you can apply this information to some awkward sentences taken from real college writing exam responses. How would you revise this sentence? Try to look at its grammatical features to decide what needs revision.

To support the fact that men drink more than women is, the survey showed only 35% of men drank at levels below the definition of bingeing while 45% of women surveyed drinking below the definition of bingeing.

Sample Answer:

To support the fact that men drink more than women is, the survey showed only 35% of men drank at levels below the definition of bingeing while 45% of women surveyed drinking below the definition of bingeing.

1. Combine like-clauses in the sentence

- "35% of men drank at levels below the definition of bingeing"

- "45% of women surveyed drinking below the definition of bingeing"

Can be: 35% of men and 45% of women drinking at levels below the definition of bingeing.

2. Reorganize the sentence so that the subject comes first

- "To support the fact that men drink more than women is, the survey showed"

Can be: The survey showed that men drink more than women

3. Result:

The survey showed that men drink more than women, with 35% of men and 45% of women drinking at levels below the definition of bingeing.



Part II: Awkward Symptoms of Ungrammaticality

Awkward sentences can also be approached from a less grammatical angle. Instead, tutors can point out the symptoms of ungrammaticality. For example, instead of looking at sentence structure, tutors can discuss wordiness or lack of clarity (“Avoiding Awkward Sentences”; “Awkward Sentences”). Let’s diagnose this awkward sentence:

It is my opinion that one of the primary reasons for which the newsmedia lends itself to such exaggerations in their coverage of health risks is entertainment.

1. Wordiness

Several words in this sentence can be taken out or replaced without changing the meaning.

~~It is my opinion that~~ (I think) one of the primary reasons ~~for which the news media lends itself to such exaggerations~~ (exaggerates) ~~in~~ their coverage of health risks is entertainment.

2. Lack of clarity

Why is newsmedia both “itself” and “their”? What does it mean to say the “reason is entertainment” – who is being entertained? Is the phrase “one of the primary reasons” necessary information? Let’s take the less wordy form of the sentence in order to clarify it.

I think ~~one of the primary reasons~~ the news media exaggerates ~~their~~ its coverage of health risks ~~is entertainment~~. (in order to entertain the public).

By looking at the symptoms of ungrammaticality, tutors avoid losing writers in technical explanations and instead provide a practical and self-sustaining way of clarifying writing. Look at the difference this approach made for the sentence:

Before: It is my opinion that one of the primary reasons for which the newsmedia lends itself to such exaggerations in their coverage of health risks is entertainment.

After: I think the news media exaggerates its coverage of health risks in order to entertain the public.

Exercise:

What issues does the sentence below have? This time look at grammatical symptoms, such as wordiness and lack of clarity. Feel free to try cutting and replacing words.

It is my opinion that as this country becomes more aware and accepting of the differences we all possess, examples of our breaking with tradition and recognizing and celebrating our uniqueness, as was seen at these three Universities, will continue and receive the same welcome that these three women did.

Sample Answer:

It is my opinion that as this country becomes more aware and accepting of the differences we all possess, examples of our breaking with tradition and recognizing and celebrating our uniqueness, as was seen at these three Universities, will continue and receive the same welcome that these three women did.

1. Cut and replace words

~~It is my opinion~~ (I think) that as this country becomes more aware and accepting of ~~the~~ differences ~~we all possess~~, examples of ~~our~~ breaking with tradition and recognizing and celebrating ~~our~~ uniqueness, as was seen at these three Universities, [will continue and receive the same welcome that these three women did.]- not as important

2. Identify the cause and effect within the sentence

-Cause: "becoming more aware" and "accepting of differences"

-Effect: leads to universities "recognizing and celebrating uniqueness"

3. Result:

I think that greater awareness and acceptance of differences in this country will lead to universities recognizing and celebrating uniqueness, just as they welcomed these three women.



Part III: Strategies for Preventing Awkwardness

We can also view awkward sentences in terms of how students can find and prevent them (“Avoiding Awkward Sentences”). There are two good preventative strategies for avoiding awkwardness in writing:

1) Read aloud

Be sure to read a sentence aloud in order to hear what it sounds like. Does it sound “off”? How would you explain your idea to a friend? Can you rephrase your sentence based on how you would orally explain it?

2) Cut words

Awkwardness often results from using too many words. Try to cut or replace unnecessary words. For example, in Part II we used this technique with great effect, cutting “lends itself to such exaggerations” to simply “exaggerates” and replacing “It is my opinion” with “I think.”

Exercise:

Try revising this last sentence using the preventative strategies above. Also, remember our previous discussions about grammatical categories and symptoms.

We are not teaching them to help their fellow man, sometimes at a personal expense to themselves, nor knowing or loving their neighbor.

Sample Answer:

We are not teaching them to help their fellow man, sometimes at a personal expense to themselves, nor knowing or loving their neighbor.

1. Read aloud in order to find like-parts of the sentence

-“to help their fellow man”

-“knowing or loving their neighbor”

Can be: “help their fellow man or love their neighbor”

2. Identify less important parts

-“sometimes at a personal expense to themselves”

Can be moved to the end of the sentence

3. Clarify vague references

-“We are not teaching them”

Can be: “We are not teaching students”

3. Result

We are not teaching students to help their fellow man or love their neighbor, even at a personal expense to one other.

References:

"Avoiding Awkward Sentences." *Writing Center Resources*. Villanova University, n.d. Web. 27 Nov. 2012.

"Awkward Sentences." *Skidmore Guide to Writing*. Skidmore College, n.d. Web. 27 Nov. 2012.

Barton, Ellen, Ellen Halter, Nancy McGee, & Lisa McNeilley. "The Awkward Problem of Awkward Sentences." *Written Communication* 15.1 (1998): 69-98. Print.

