



Dream of Travel Writing

Mastering Style at a Sentence by Sentence Level

As I was saying, today we're going to be talking less about a specific style and more about things you can use no matter who you're writing for, no matter what your context.

Specifically, what I want to look at today is three particular areas where I see a lot of issues. And interestingly I probably did more research than I usually do for the slides today both because it's harder to write sentences that are wrong than sentences that are correct, so that took me a little while, but also, I was trying to dig up what editors biggest pet peeves are. And I got a lot that were about novels, and those were specifically about story, which we're going to talk about next week. There was a dearth of ones from editors. They were simply, "proofread," or "make sure I know what you're talking about in the very first sentence." But a lot of the things we're going to talk about today—like I said, there's three specific ones that I want to go over—feed into those issues.

Depending on who you ask, there's three different types of editing, but basically there's three things that go into making quote-unquote good writing. One of them is this technical aspect of writing we're going to talk about today. Another is that choice craft aspect of writing, in terms of choosing which words you're going to use, putting your sentences together in a certain order, choosing the details that you think will best fit what you're talking about. And then, past that, is the content level—having interesting things to write about in the first place and having the information to carry your story along.

I put those things in order because that's how you should learn them, that's how they're presented in school, but also you need the first and the one below that for the further off ones to work. What I've seen an increasing amount of is people who might write interesting words, who might have interesting facts that they've dug up, who might have interesting stories, but the way that they presented that has a certain level of textual incoherence that makes it unfortunately hard to read and unfortunately hard for an editor to assign or buy, even if they've already assigned it, which gets us into the area of kill fees.

I've had, for instance, a lot of people come to me recently and say, "Well, I'm just not getting responses to my pitches." Sometimes people have asked me for pitch critiques in these cases. And I often say that with a pitch critique I can see a lot of different things that are going on with your writing that need help. And that typically traces back to specific issues with your idea generation.

So often there's issues with a pitch that have to do with the idea and I can look at it and I can see where in the process of coming up with ideas they're having issues, but unfortunately what I've been seeing lately is that some pitches themselves—forget about, you know, how they're presenting the idea or if the idea is good, but there's just glaring mistakes in the



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writing that would put an editor off no matter how the quality of your idea is. And unfortunately, a lot of these mistakes, when I talk to people about it, they don't realize. So that's really what we're going to go into today.

In terms of this stuff we're going to talk about today, like I said, I come up with these things quite often in my current work through editing people's pitches and also editing folks that are writing for us in the database, but I've also spent time in the past as a magazine editor and also editing in-house at a university. And one of the reasons that I really wanted to talk to you about this right now, and the reason we're taking a little bit of time to focus on this, is that I've really seen a resurgence isn't quite the right word, but I've really seen an uptick in the amount of submissions that are lacking in these areas of writing.

And it's the kind of thing where if you are trying to move to a different level and find that you're not getting traction, this might be why. And it's something that no one is ever going to point out to you, unfortunately. If your ideas aren't quite on the mark an editor will say, "Hey, that's not quite right for us," but if your pitch is off in one of these more basic writing ways then they're probably just not going to respond at all or they'll say something more akin to a basic no. If you're getting those types of "no"s, then this is a really good indication that this is what they're actually saying.

Before we start talking about those three things that I mentioned today, why are we talking about something in terms of the sentence level? Last week, like I said, we talked about AP Style, but we talked a lot about specific words and word choices and capitalization and different things like that. But the reason that I chose to focus on the sentence level today, in part is that we're going to look at other types of construction next week, we're going to look more at a story arc, or a narrative arc, or how you put together a narrative feature. And in the following week we're going to look more at the craft of the personal essay, which is different. It doesn't have a narrative in that same way, but it still has its own sense of flow.

Today we're talking about sentences. I'm not talking about paragraphs and I'm not going to talk about paragraphs in a future week per se, because sentences are universal—you use them always. But the types of paragraphs you use and how they lead from one into another depend a lot on whether you're doing, let's say, more journalistic writing, or if you're doing more essay writing, or more narrative writing online.

We're going to focus this week on the sentence, in part because of that but also because this is the level at which I see a lot of issues. Because misspelling is something that Microsoft Word or even just my web browser does for me or Grammarly can help us out with a lot, but



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sentence structure, and what's missing or what's wrong, is where a lot of these app-based functions falter.

And I had mentioned before that Grammarly has really basic issues where it won't notice if there's a word missing in your sentence, even if it's a sentence that has no pronoun or verb entirely. It won't notice if you have any of the issues here that we're going to talk about today. So that's another reason I'm looking at these, is that they won't be caught by the different apps that you might use, hoping that they might be catching these for you. So, these are the ones that you really need to know because no one else is going to tell you.

First of all, I asked earlier before we got started how many of you were familiar with the concept of dependent clause and independent clause, because those things are going to come up a lot today. But I'm going to say just for the sake of getting us all on the same page, really quickly, what is the basic kernel of definition of a sentence. A sentence, at a minimum, needs a subject and a verb. Now you'll see in a lot of online writing, and I certainly do this, and a lot of other people do this as well, that there are sentences that are composed of one verb or one word that may not be a subject or a verb. It may just be an adjective or it might be a list. And that is something that is quite particular to web writing. But as they say, you need to know the rules before you break them and that's what we're going to be looking at today.

I've given you a couple examples here of the same sort of sentiment of the first person and then the verb "go" with a lot of different verb tenses, and if any of you guys have learned foreign languages this will probably bring back horrible memories/shuddering or at least some kind of memories. But I did this for a reason, so I want to show you that this is a sentence that is just a subject and a verb and it can get increasingly complicated but it can get much more complicated than that.

I took this simple sentence and I added a destination. I added "I went to the café." That one sentence, "I went to the café," can be a sentence on its own. But then this is the same sentence. This is the sentence about going to the café and it is, in fact, one sentence which is three, six, nine, twelve, fifteen lines long here in this 28-point font, which is the smallest I thought I could make it and have you guys still see it ... So I'm just going to read this for those that are following along by phone.

I took that sentence, "I went to the café," and I turned it into: "When I was in London, which was pretty often during this time, because my friend—my old roommate from Boston actually—had landed a flat in a very posh Central London neighborhood that allowed you to walk anywhere you'd want to go, we often went to this café, at first, because it had amazing dishes from all over the world, like perfect Swedish cardamom buns and full Japanese



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breakfast, but later we found out it was connected to a very witty, intellectual magazine and was regularly frequented by the magazine's editor, so we continued going hoping to run into one of them and get an in with the magazine.”

There's a couple random errors that are in that sentence because I was writing it sort of trying to point out different kinds of things and I didn't notice those in the beginning until I read it to you. So let's ignore those issues for now. But I want to show you that this super long sentence, which is, in fact, one sentence, and for all sort of editorial grammatical purposes could probably be left that way if you absolutely needed to, contains all of these different clauses. So every time I switch from the different italics, and the normal font is where we're switching clauses. You'll see, for instance, here in the middle this off-set clause in the middle of another clause. We go between one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten clauses here in this sentence. So this is the same thing as “I went to the café” but in this sentence we're giving all of this context here, I went to the café, why I went to the café, that specific café, some description about that café.

Now the thing with the sentence is that I often here from people, especially people that come from, not a lack of a writing background, but other writing backgrounds, particularly other writing backgrounds that are, let's call them dryer, particularly technical, like science writing or all sorts of legal writing, that they want to write flowery prose. They don't know how to write in this flowery descriptive fashion that you see in travel features or in books, but the thing is that that flowery descriptive fashion is often something that they're using to describe sentences that are very long, not necessarily people who are writing an obscene number of adjectives.

They're often being written with a lot of details, which get packed into sentences in these really obscene ways. And I remember when I first started doing this that I was only writing like this because it's how we write in Italian. And also in German, they write really long sentences and it's totally fine, no one complains about it. And it's just this horrible hold over that I have having gone to college in essentially another language. But then as I got more into journalism, I realized that when you are writing journalistically and you are trying to pack in an obscene amount of detail into the very short space that you have, writing more sentences where you have to create subjects and verbs and connections actually just uses up your word count, and so a way to save word count is to shove a ridiculous number of clauses into one sentence.

I was just reading, not in preparation for this call, but for other reasons, a book by someone who is originally a pastry chef, but has turned into a bit of a writer by having a very well-read blog and also by writing quite a lot of recipe books that often include his stories. And I was reading the very beginning of his new book, which is coming out next week, and I noticed



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that the first sentence was exactly something like this and I thought, “Wow, what a way to start the very first page of your book.” Like, that’s ballsy to put that right out there at the very beginning. It really says that’s the tone, but the thing is if you look at a lot of feature articles and a lot of journalistic articles, even if they’re a bit shorter it’s very common that that first paragraph, which is really just that one sentence, looks quite a bit like this.

Let’s look at a couple different things that are going on here. You’ll notice at the end of this paragraph that I had, which is one sentence, but we’ll call it a paragraph, that there are two bits here where I say “a very witty, intellectual magazine” and “was regularly frequented by the magazine’s editor.” There’s no comma before that. I say “witty, intellectual magazine *and* was regularly frequented” because I’m talking, the subject here, if we go back, “we later found out *it*,” so the subject here is the café, so *it* was connected and *it* was regularly frequented, so there’s no comma here, because the subject hasn’t changed. Now the second time that happens is here at the bottom, so “we.” Now the subject has become we: “we continued going, hoping to run into one of them and get an in.” “We were hoping to get an in.”

Because, again, the subject hasn’t changed here and even the verb hasn’t changed because its hoping to run into and then hoping to get an in, there’s no comma in the middle of those two things.

This is a really, really frequent issue that I’m seeing to the point that I think people have just come around to you can put commas wherever and as often as you want and it doesn’t matter, which is this odd extension of the Oxford comma that we’re going to talk about a little bit and if you joined us last week you already heard me talk about. But it’s not correct to have a comma in those two settings. Now if you were having three different verbs in a row that would then make it correct, and we’re going to look at that later and see how to make sure that you address those things properly.

Another thing that you’ll notice is, as I mentioned, there’s 10 different clauses in here and some of them are off-set in slightly different ways. So for instance we’ve got this one, which is off-set by em dashes. An em dash is the long dash and an en dash is the smaller dash. So if you’re doing that kind of off-set it needs to be done with the em dash. Okay, that’s the correct way to do it and depending on which style system you’re using there may be spaces before and after and there may not be, that’s something you’re going to have to look at the publication you’re writing for and see how they do it. In this case, for our in-house style guide I do it like this where they are in fact connected and that’s sort of off-set there.



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I'm not going to get too much into base punctuation right now, but the off-set of the em dash that I use sort of gratuitously, which is another kind of Italian hold-over but it's something that I've also seen people use, I wouldn't say incorrectly because it's something that is a bit hard to do incorrectly. But it's important to remember that any kind of punctuation like this, if it's an em dash or if it's a semicolon, which I didn't show you or have in there, you should avoid sending them in anything you're sending to an editor unless your 100 percent sure that you know the correct way to use it.

For instance, the semicolon, and if anybody's not sure what that is I'll pop one in the chat box, the semicolon, woops that's a colon, and then this one is the semicolon. The semicolon is intended to separate two complete sentences. So remember when I was talking above, the semicolon has to have it's own verb and subject and those can be repeated, but they actually need to be repeated on the page, not as an assumption, then you can use a semicolon in the middle, but they need to be two complete sentences, so that's how to use that.

The dash, like I said, is more liberal, and I don't have a slide on how to use those incorrectly. Because, like I said, I didn't want to get too much into punctuation. But I just wanted to remind you if you're not sure about a bit of punctuation then just stick to the basic comma-period combination. You really don't need more than that unless you like to write really long sentences like I do.

The way to write really long sentences is to use a collection of these different types of connectors. So, I've given them a couple different types of names here, which I've sort of created. I'm not giving you the grammatical names because they're ugly, basically, so I'm giving you ones that are easier to remember and that make more sense.

Connectors are ones that –I'm going to talk about two different types –they connect to different thoughts. So sometimes they're going to connect independent clauses and sometimes they're going to connect dependent clauses. And so we're going to look more at that further on, but I just highlighted here the ones I used in this long sentence and we're going to look at some others later.

Then there's also ones that are extenders. "Like" and "that" are interesting in that there's a lot of discussion on when you should use those and if you should use "like" at all because some people overuse it. I had quite a spirited discussion on the use of "like" the other day. It was myself as a former Californian and another Californian who was a former Kentuckian with someone who was Finish who uses like to a beautiful level in her spoken language for someone who's not of American extraction and she was saying it was something she picked up to make her American sound more correct. And the thing is, because it's become such a



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mainstay in spoken American English I've noticed it often creeping with incorrect usage into written English.

If you are using "like" in your written English it's important to use it in a place where it actually belongs rather than in a spoken fashion.

In this case, the way that I have used "like" is that I said that "there were amazing dishes from all over the world," comma, "like." So, if you are giving a selection of items and it is being offset you would want to put a comma in there, but if you are saying it was like a light blue color, that's the kind of instance when like would exist in spoken speech but it wouldn't necessarily exist in written speech and you should just say "it was a slightly light blue color." In this case, like I said, I've used it to put off a list of examples, of the phrase here "dishes from all over the world."

I mentioned earlier how a lot of people have this concept that you need to be flowery or wordy to write like a quote-unquote real travel writer. And I talked about how I think that that is less about the word choice that people are using, because quote-unquote good or real travel writers aren't using a bunch of random adjectives and a big long list. They are choosing things very precisely to describe the sentiment and the sense of place that they are out to illustrate.

What is it that creates the sense of flowery or wordiness? I talked a little bit about the journalistic implications and how you want to shove as many things in your word count as possible but I also pulled up this quote from Mark Twain.

So as some of you may know, Mark Twain was not just a novelist. Before that he was an ad man. He wrote advertisements, and he was also a journalist. And he had a very funny book about the German language and that was actually the quote that I was trying to find for you that wouldn't come up. I think it was because it was in German, but he was talking about how sentences in German, similarly to that sentence I wrote you, can be up to an entire page long and how that was one of the ludicrous things of the German language. But you'll see here that he basically abhors long sentences in the first place.

And I think a lot of this comes from his work doing advertisement rather than in journalism, because in advertisement they try to keep the sentences very very short to make them really really readable. Because, first of all, they're often physically displayed on billboards and things like that and space is at a premium and if you shove too much stuff in there then the



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words won't be visible at all, but also because they get to spend so much time. They get to spend like three months figuring out what is the perfect sentence for that thing.

If you've heard the Mark Twain quote, which I suppose isn't an actual Mark Twain quote but is attributed to him, "I'm writing you a long letter because I didn't have time to write you a short one," that kind of gets back to this sentence, which is to the best of people's ability to know, from him directly. He said, "I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences. That is the way to write English—it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it;" –note the semicolon— "don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in."

Now it's interesting because in the sentence where he says "don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity," he is allowing his sentence to become longer than it needs to, with this additional "and." We're going to get to lists in a little bit. He says, "When you catch an adjective, kill it. No, I don't mean utterly, but kill most of them—" note the em dash— "then the rest will be valuable." So, take a second to look at the em dash, this is like a semicolon to separate two dependent clauses, two full sentences. He says about adjectives, "They weaken when they are close together. They give strength when they are wide apart. An adjective habit, or a wordy, diffuse, flowery habit, once fastened upon a person, is as hard to get rid of as any other vice."

Now, the reason I wanted to discuss this is that this talks about two different things. Remember I mentioned how wordy and flowery people often think that they're talking about the use of adjectives, and here he talked about the use of adjectives, but then in here he's also talking about simple language, short words and brief sentences, which is quite different from all this stuff about adjectives, if you think about it, because you cannot use adjectives and, as I showed you, still use quite long sentences and use big words if you feel so inclined.

The thing about quote-unquote good writing is that there's a lot of things that go into it. Using active verbs, see he says here, "they weaken" rather than "they make your text weak when they are close together." Using one word rather than five. These are all hallmarks of good writing, but you'll notice in here his sentences have quite a bit of variety. If you look at where the commas, semicolons, and em dashes fall just on the page, the way that it looks here, you'll see that there's a lot of variations on the divisions, on the lengths of the sentences, on the types of punctuations that he uses. And this is one of the reasons that I wanted to talk to you about sentences. It's so important to learn how to use different ones.

Let's get now into talking about clauses, so we can look at that. The whole thing about sentences, I said we're going to look at three different issues, so the correct use of commas, dangling modifiers and agreements, and lists.



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Before I get to that I just want to comment on the use of the Oxford comma. We talked about this last week, so some of you may have been here last week when we talked about that, but if not, I want to explain here quickly. The Oxford comma is when you use a comma before the noun at the end of the sentence, no matter what. So, the example I gave was “I’d like to thank my parents, comma Mother Theresa and the Pope, with no comma in the middle. The Oxford comma would dictate that you would write “I’d like to thank my parents, Mother Theresa, and the Pope.”

But if you don’t use the Oxford comma you open yourself up to this ambiguity of it sounding like your parents are Mother Theresa and the Pope. So that’s why I personally like to use the Oxford comma, but I see a lot of people who have been trained not to use it and it is AP Style not to use it, yet a lot of publications will use it anyway.

In terms of commas I’m not going to talk about this Oxford comma, which is the list comma, but we’re going to talk about grammatically necessary commas. So I mentioned that in terms of connectors, there’s really two different kinds. There’s the one that brings two fully independent clauses together, and the ones that don’t—that bring together a dependent and an independent clause. So, I asked earlier on who had experience with the terms independent and dependent clause. And some of you haven’t encountered them at all and some of you have.

So I’m going to just give a little explanation of this, so if you’ve already heard about them bear with me. The basic, basic concept at the most basic definitions for each one is that independent clause has that subject and verb that we talked about. It has everything that qualifies as a sentence, but it’s a clause because it’s going to be joined with other clauses. You can just think of independent clause as a sentence because it’s a much easier way to think about it if you’re new to thinking about this. So, an independent clause functions on its own as a sentence without needing anything else attached. Whereas a dependent clause is lacking in something, a subject or a verb, typically the subject, in order for it to become an independent clause or a full sentence.

We’re going to look at a lot of examples when I talk about lists and when I talk about the independent versus dependent clause, but for now with the conjunction connectors, I want to talk about bringing together two full sentences. So when you’re doing that, like I said, you’re going to have two subjects and two verbs on each side so that means that in order for these two sentences to be joined in a grammatically correct fashion there’s only certain words that you can use and you need to put a comma before that word. The one that you see most commonly is “and.” I mentioned that earlier when we looked at my very long sentence example, the reason that I didn’t have the comma before those two “ands” at the end was because those sections were not sentences. They were not independent clauses. They did not



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require the comma before the noun because they were just the verb parts. They didn't repeat the subject and that's where they weren't full independent clauses on their own.

So you can definitely see instances where "and" is used in the list where you don't need the comma. And the same goes for "but," and "or," and "so," and "for," and "nor." So these are all ones where you might see them instead in independent clause construction, but they're the only ones you can use to conjoin two complete sentences together. So this is really important to remember that if you have two things that you want to connect and you don't want to use one of these you're going to have to either use a period or one of those other punctuation options that we looked at early like the em dash—the long dash, or the semicolon.

Let's look at subordinate connectors because there's a lot more of these. So these are the connectors that add a dependent clause to an independent clause. It's very frequently going to mean things like "because blah-blah-blah-blah-blah, this happened," or "since blah-blah-blah-blah-blah, this happened," or "though blah-blah-blah-blah-blah, this happened," or "now that blah-blah-blah-blah-blah, this happened," or "after." It's typically going to be something that's a reason that's explaining the sentence that comes along after the fact. So the thing about that is that it's very important, like I said, the things we talked about on the previous slide, are for connecting two complete sentences. But these, a much much longer list is for an incomplete sentence.

What that means is that you need to make sure that as you are writing this up that the clause that you have written is dependent on the main clause to make sense. So I have some later on that are specifically dealing with dangling modifiers where you'll see this in action, but just to give a couple ones I could say that "because it didn't upload, the slides can't be played through the Webinar Jam's viewer, and instead I'm running them on my computer." So, we're going to look at how those things match up later, which involves a bit of gymnastics, which is just what I had to do when I was making up that sentence for you. But we'll also offer sequences like "provided that you arrive on time, you can attend the show." But that's a little weird, right? Because I said that they need to not be independent clauses, but it seems like you arrive on time, that could be a sentence, right?

But when you say "provided that" you need to know what the "provided that" is. So that's why a lot of these words have contingencies. "Supposing it doesn't rain tomorrow, my flight will leave on time." Or "Now that I have my train ticket, I can board the plane." So sometimes they can be sentences that if they didn't have that subordinate conjunction, they would function on their own. By adding that, it needs to have a reason. So hopefully that's not too much of a struggle. I know it's a little hard without seeing the examples, but hopefully we're going to see some more when we talk about modifiers.



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Let's look at the modifiers. There's two names for these and they're two slightly different issues. You'll often hear them called misplaced or dangling modifiers. I looked for a bit for the reason people called them dangling, and I have to say I didn't love any of them and they all kind of were slightly different and none of them sounded 100 percent convincing so I'm going to explain to you the whole category all at once.

Essentially, the issue with the misplaced or the dangling modifier is when a modifier and those things that we just talked about, those subordinate clauses, "though," "after," "in the event that," "whenever," "because of," "in the case of," those are all at the beginning of modifiers, right? Because it's "in the case of" something, so they're modifying something. They're modifying some main event so there's a lot of things that are not quite so clearly those subordinate clauses that we looked at that are going to be modifiers, that we're going to talk about as well, but those will come up here. So they have to modify something, so if the thing that they are modifying is not appropriately connected to the modifier, that is when you get into this misplaced and dangling situation.

I've got a bunch of right and wrong ones for us to look at. So, the first one I've got here I've slightly separated them into if they come before the main clause or after, but I want to show you here how I had to do some of that gymnastics that I was telling you about. So, the right way is "I had to go to the event on Wednesday, which is the day it poured, and that sucked, because I had not packed an umbrella." It looks like I cut and pasted these wrong, but so the wrong version is: "Wednesday was the day of the event, which was the day it poured, and that sucked, because I had not packed an umbrella."

In this case the issue is that "Wednesday" is the part being modified by "which was the day it poured." So, because the subject is lacking in here between "which" and "was," we need that "Wednesday" to be attached to the modifier "which was the day it poured." What that means is that if you wrote this sentence in the first place you would need to go and fuss it around to put it in the right order.

Let's look at some other ones. These ones are much simpler, and I only wrote them one time, so they're all correct. I gave a couple where I put the right one first and a couple where I put the wrong one first. Let's look at the first one, so I said the correct version was "I was so excited to take our anniversary trip in Greece," —okay, so we're modifying the word Greece — "which was where my husband had proposed." In the second one, which is very similar to the one I had earlier, I said, "Greece was the perfect place for our anniversary trip, which was where my husband had proposed."



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Now it seems really simple that you would say, oh, instead of this I would say “Greece was the perfect place for our anniversary trip because that was where my husband proposed.” And that’s a totally fine way to fix this as well, or a different way to say this, but part of the reason it’s important to look at these “which” examples is this is one of those ways that a lot of journalists use to, not really pad out our sentences, but to take advantage of word count. So rather than saying the lengthier “Greece was the perfect place for our anniversary trip because that was where my husband had proposed.” We can say “Our anniversary trip was to Greece, which was where my husband proposed.” You can use this “which” to cut out a lot of the words by making it two separate clauses, which is why I had mentioned earlier that a lot of journalists favor this clause after clause after clause approach because it allows them to get more words into their word count.

Let’s look at a couple of other ones. So, this is one that I found online. I tried to get examples that were a little more travel writing related, but this one I just liked because I see this exact thing all the time. In this case, the right one is “After reading the original study, I find the article unconvincing.” It’s very important, because there’s no noun in the beginning, to say the noun right away, because this is what we are modifying. In the previous example we had the main clause first, and then we had the modifying clause. Then we need to make sure first that the word that’s being modified comes at the end so that it can attach to the modification clause. But here, it’s the opposite. Here the modifying clause comes first, so the subject or the noun being modified needs to be at the beginning rather than the end.

The way that I often see this kind of thing is, as it says here, “After reading the original study, the article remains unconvincing.” The author of this sentence has implied that they read the original study, or if in the previous sentence they were talking about a character in the book, it would imply that the character in the book had read the original study, or if it was a journalistic article, and we’re talking about a source they had spoken to that was an expert on this topic that they might think it implies that it’s talking about the expert, but this is one of the most common dangling modifying instances that I see.

This is what actually got me started on this whole topic a few months ago was that someone had sent me something that had quite a few of these and when I broached the subject with her she told me that she had put it through Grammarly and this is when I figured out that Grammarly was missing all of these issues. This is something that you absolutely need to kind of make a note on the side. If it doesn’t immediately jump out to you that this sentence is wrong, you know, copy that over, write that down. But something that you want to keep an eye out for is these initial subordinate clauses followed by the noun. The subject is not the same subject, the explanatory subject of that original clause.



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Mastering Style at a Sentence by Sentence Level

Let's look at some with a run-on sentence first and maybe some of these will trip you up. It's very similar to the one above, but it's one that I wrote with more of a travel angle. "Since traveling to Greece, octopus never tastes the same anywhere else." Again, this is the type of thing that I see all the time. And when you just hear it or if you just look at it, it makes sense, but the issue is the ambiguity and the lack of appropriate subjects here, because even the second part doesn't have the subject. The subject is "to whom it doesn't taste the same anywhere else." So the correct version here, "Since traveling to Greece, I find octopus never tastes the same anywhere else."

Somebody says, "That's why I have another person read what I wrote to point these out." But a really good tactic that somebody taught me a while ago is that if you have a certain error that you know you have an issue with—I was actually taught this with words that people often overuse, so if you overuse "that," which I used to as a hold over from Italian, or if you have a tendency to use the name of the place you're writing about too often, or if you have a word that you always misspell, you can make a little checklist for yourself. Once the piece is all ready to turn in and you think that you've proofread it, or you've proofread it to the best of your ability, or the time that you have, just run a quick search for those things. In this case, you could skim through your piece and look for every sentence that starts with all those words we showed earlier, like "after," "all those," "since," "before." Those are a lot of words, but most of us don't use all of them, so you could just run a quick search of "since," or "because," or "so," just to make sure that all of your modifiers are correct.

Let's look at this last one before we move on to agreement and lists, which is another huge offender I see all the time. All three of these are really huge offenders. But that, similar to this dangling modifiers one, is one that I don't see standing out to people. Just like with the commas, that people don't know where they must put them, or where they shouldn't, or they could if they'd like to.

For this last modifier I've actually given a couple of examples, and these are of course freelance writing related. Here's another super common one, "After turning in the assignment, the editor still hasn't responded to any of my emails." So, it's obvious to us that it's "After I turned in the assignment," but it does need to be correct to begin the sentence. You can simply change it to: "After I turned in the assignment, the editor still hasn't responded to any of my emails." Or you can put the subject in the other bit, so this version, like I've said, is where we've turned it into two separate clauses. But the "after" has made the first clause dependent upon the second clause. Another way of keeping the first clause pure and subject free is to say: "After turning in the assignment, I've emailed the editor several times and still not received a single response."



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Like I've said any of these ones that are wrong there's usually multiple ways that you can change them and that's up to you. But it's important to catch these things. And these are the kind of things where they're often going to be in your pitch letters where it will do you in. If it's in the article, the editor can kind of say, "Well, as long as there's not 25 of them, you know, they've spent a lot of time on this and maybe they just put that in at the end." But if it's in your pitch letter, they're really going to notice it.

Likewise with lists, and lists have a tendency to come up in your pitch letters because you're talking about all the different things you're going to cover in the article. I put two in here that I think are very much the types of things that would appear in your pitches, but let's first talk about what the issue is, the explanation of the issue. I found this explanation online, so I found one that was adequately basic, "I work quickly and am careful," versus "I work quickly and carefully." Now this seems a little weird, right? It seems like there is nothing really wrong with this "I work quickly and am careful." It seems like you know we haven't added a comma here so that's right, like "I work quickly and I am careful."

That seems like it all agrees, so what's the issue here? The issue here is the list should be around "I work." So "I work quickly and carefully." This is what I was saying, it seems a little weird, some of these things, that they're grammar rather than style, but it goes back to what I said in the blog post and in the newsletter, that was leading up to today, which is that it's all about what makes your prose, your copy, your text, the clearest read for the reader. And this is one of those cases where it's another word that doesn't need to be there.

What I often see in these lists, is this lack of agreement, so agreement here is "I work quickly and carefully." We've got two words of the same type. There's a couple different issues here. There's one where you're having the verb and the adverb, and then continuing with the adverb instead of another verb, that's one that often comes up. People often will change the subject within their list even if they have other verbs in their list that have referred to the same subject. Or another one you might see, where there's some items in the list. See here they're done correctly. They've retained the same subject here and they have a verb.

What sometimes happens is that there will be "I work quickly and am careful, and everyone says so." Where now they have a different structure entirely, because it's not just that they've changed the subject, but it's that there's no subject here. They've changed the subject, but they've also added a subject where there wasn't one previously. That would work with this first sentence if we were to say "I work quickly, and everyone says I'm careful, and my boss frequently comments on how detail oriented I am." In that case we have a list that's three complete sentences, where the subject has changed every single time so that would actually be okay.



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Let's look at these examples. I said, "The destination has the highest concentration of theme parks in the world, you can visit a variety of different beaches, and it's easily accessible from many airports." The issue here is that I've kept this subject-verb, so we've got "destination has," "you can," "it is," but the issue is that two of these have the same subject. It would be really better for you here, rather than pulling this one into "you can visit a variety of beaches," would be to say "The destination has the highest concentration of theme parks in the world, access to many beaches, and accessibility from many airports."

So, what I've done here is I have taken this "The destination has" description, and it's the description that I'm repeating every time, so the destination has the highest concentration, access to a variety of beaches, and accessibility from many airports." So, I've made it all agree that they are all nouns.

Now the kind of next-level version of this agreement is to really make sure, like I said, that you're not just continuing to make sure it's a verb if it's a verb or that you're continuing in this case the adverb, but that you're really making sure that you're using similar words and similar descriptions of those words so that your list doesn't become imbalanced. Sometimes for entries for the database, I see this a lot, people will give me a list sentence where they're talking about different articles that have appeared in this section in the past and for each different article that they talk about, even though they're trying to have it in one sentence, they have a totally different modifier.

Sometimes they'll have one article, where they'll say this article has included three things, and this article will have a sentence that has a different order of things, and those things just need to be separated out into three sentences. So, this is the kind of case where if you wanted to just keep this like this you would need to just separate it out into three sentences.

Now in the next one I've made a super glaring error, so hopefully you guys will all hear this when I read this out loud. "Upon stepping onto the main street, I was immediately hypnotized by the steady beat of the car and bicycle horns, the stark colors of the flashing signs atop each miniscule shop, and pushed to the side by a steady stream of foot traffic." Let me know if you spotted what the issue is in that sentence in the chat box, and not the issue that I'm going to correct on the screen right now, which is that there's an extra "into" but the issue itself. And if you did spot it tell me what it is.

I'm going to try to mark it up here. I said, the subject is "I" and "I was immediately hypnotized by." I'm going to change the color here.



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So, then what I was hypnotized by is we've got this "steady beat" and then the "stark colors." But then in this last bit "and pushed to the side" now, this makes sense with "I was," so what I could do to make this work, is I could say "I was immediately hypnotized by the steady beat of car and bicycle horns, dazzled by the stark colors of the flashing signs and pushed to the side by the steady stream of foot traffic."

If I did that then we've got three verbs that all mirror, and then it works but in the previous state, we were either, depending on how you look at it, missing a central verb or we were having an additional verb here. Because you could say you were immediately hypnotized by the steady stream of foot traffic as well, similar to the steady beats, but I'd probably like to change it so I didn't have the word "steady" twice.

This is one of these things that shouldn't be difficult to spot and you'll notice, for instance, that when I read that big long sentence earlier that there were some issues with it like it should have been editors plural instead of editor singular. And I have to go back and change all those things before we put it up for coaching students, but that those errors I notice them as soon as I read it out loud.

If you're like, like Kerri mentioned earlier, "This is why I have other people read my things," what do you do if you can't find someone else to read your work before you send it to the editor? You read it out loud. I have a friend who is a five times New York Times best-selling author and every year when he is on a just-get-the-F-away-from-it-all vacation with his wife, they sit together and read his entire new book out loud, looking for issues. So, reading it out loud is really the best way to catch those things, because you can't skim over them the way you do when you're just reading it. So, I really recommend that.

Now you know some new things to look for that you might not have known before. Hopefully there was at least one thing for each of you that you weren't quite clear on before that you are now.

Thanks so much for joining us today and hopefully next week I will have complained enough to the webinar provider that we'll be able to get our slides working. And thank you so much for bearing with me on that. I hope that you were able to see everything. We will catch you next week. Bye guys.