

Things Better Left Unsaid

WORDINESS AND SYNTAX TROUBLE

or: Difficult Things You Never Have to Say

English is complicated enough without writers getting in our own way. Often we take a perfectly straightforward idea and, to make it sound academic, or because we think there's something wrong with saying what we mean as simply as possible, we create trouble for ourselves.

To take a simple example, let's say teenage drivers are being ticketed for speeding proportionally more often than other drivers. That simple statement contains several important details, all clearly expressed. 1) that teenage drivers are ticketed for speeding, 2) that other drivers are ticketed for speeding, 3) that, a larger percentage of teenage drivers than other groups are ticketed for speeding. All three ideas are amply expressed by our sentence:

***Easy way:* Teenage drivers are ticketed for speeding proportionally more often than other drivers.**

How many ways can we complicate this sentence?

1. UNNECESSARY IF/THEN

One popular way to complicate a simple expression is to add unnamed people and place them into a confusing and unnecessary cause/effect situation.

***Hard way:* If the driver looks as if he or she might be a teenager, then he or she is more likely to be pulled over and given a ticket for speeding by an officer who thinks he or she might be a youthful driver.**

In addition to unnecessarily complicating our simple idea, this sentence is also massively overpopulated with at least one female teenage driver and one male, plus an opinionated officer.

You may say that the new sentence introduces a fresh and useful piece of information about the prejudice of certain traffic officers, and I agree. But the solution is not to place everybody into if/then mayhem. Instead, if you want to feature the drivers:

***Easy way:* Teenage drivers are ticketed for speeding by opinionated traffic officers proportionally more often than other drivers.**

***Easy way:* Teenage drivers are victimized by opinionated traffic officers who give to them proportionally more speeding tickets than to other drivers.**

Or, if you think the focus of your sentence now features the traffic officers:

***Easy way:* Opinionated traffic officers ticket teenage drivers for speeding far more often than other drivers.**

2. BOTHERING THE READER

Another popular way to complicate a sentence is to drag the reader into the mess, as if the author thought nobody would understand her argument unless he read about himself playing a part in it.

***Hard way:* You are far more likely to be pulled over for speeding and given a ticket if you are a teenager, or even if you look like a teenager, than if you are (or look like) an older driver.**

This method combines an if/then scenario with the uncalled-for involvement of the reader, who just wants to learn something, not get pulled over and ticketed by age-prejudiced cops.

You may say that the new sentence introduces a fresh and useful distinction between pulling over young-looking drivers and giving (or not giving) them tickets and I agree. But the solution is not to stick our reader out on the highway. Instead, if you want to feature the drivers:

***Easy way:* Drivers who look like teenagers are often pulled over by traffic officers and let go when their licenses reveal their real age.**

Or, if you think the focus of your sentence now features the traffic officers:

***Easy way:* Opinionated traffic officers pull over youthful-looking drivers for speeding far more often than other drivers.**

3. COMPLICATING WITH MAY OR MAY NOT

Very often, when a sentence contains a “may or may not” construction, we make the tactical error of introducing our readers to the wrong idea entirely.

***Hard way:* Teenage drivers are ticketed far more often than other drivers for traffic violations they may or may not have committed.**

Clearly the point of this sentence is to suggest that teenagers are ticketed oftener than they should be, for offenses they *did not* commit. Why, then, suggest that they *may have* committed offenses?

***Easy way:* Teenage drivers are ticketed far more often than other drivers for traffic violations they do not commit.**

4. FALLING OFF THE UNEVEN PARALLEL BARS

When we unnecessarily introduce a multiple comparison, we often create syntax trouble.

***Hard way:* Teenage drivers are ticketed as often if not more often than older drivers.**

What we mean is that teenagers are ticketed proportionally more often than older drivers. If they were ticketed just as often as older drivers, we'd have no reason to object. Unwisely in this sentence, we try to combine an "as often as" construction with a "more often than" construction. It's pointless to do so, and we should cut it, but to do so grammatically, we'd have to say:

***Hard but right:* Teenage drivers are ticketed as often as, if not more often than, older drivers.**

5. MISPLACED MODIFIERS

Complicating our simple sentences also makes it more likely we'll misplace our modifiers.

***Hard way:* When they appear to be young, traffic officers are more likely to pull over drivers for speeding than if they look older.**

Obviously the drivers, not the officers, are meant to appear young, but that's not what our sentence says. The solution, as it is so often, is to simplify our sentence.

***Easy way:* Traffic officers are more likely to pull over young-looking drivers for speeding.**

6. ONE OF THESE/ONE OF THOSE

Very often, a cop is just a cop, a driver is just a driver, and a situation is just a situation (not a character on a reality TV show). We create trouble for ourselves when we try to identify people as examples of a type of person, or simple facts as examples of a special class of facts.

***Hard way:* Speeding is one of those types of traffic violations where the officers will often make the mistake of pulling over younger drivers more often than they should.**

Nothing is gained by creating this special type of traffic situation, unless we're building a list of such misjudgments by officers. Much simpler sentences do the same work without the messiness.

***Easy way:* Officers pull over younger drivers more often than they should for speeding.**

7. THE KIND OF / THE SORT OF / THE TYPE OF

Like a “one of these/one of those” error, a “the kind of” construction almost always creates more trouble than it’s worth.

***Hard way:* The kind of prejudice I’m talking about is when a traffic officer pulls over a driver for speeding just because he or she thinks the driver is young.**

***Hard way:* Pulling over drivers because they look young is the sort of prejudice that happens when policemen think young people are more likely to drive poorly.**

Nothing is gained by identifying the officer’s prejudice as a type of prejudice unless we actually name the prejudice, which can be simply done without resorting to “kind of,” or “sort of,” or “type of” language.

***Easy way:* Pulling over drivers because they look young is “age bias,” plain and simple.**

8. THERE IS/THERE ARE

Sentences that begin with “There is” or “There are” can, and almost always should, be simplified to eliminate wordiness and confusion.

***Hard way:* There is a prejudice against young-looking drivers that causes traffic officers to pull them over for speeding more often than they pull over older-looking drivers.**

Our sentences features drivers speeding, officers ticketing, plenty of action, but its verb—is!—is the weakest verb of all. Instead of making a robust claim, it says “There is a prejudice.” More substantive choices include:

***Easy way:* Traffic officers discriminate against younger-looking drivers.**

***Easy way:* Officers target young drivers for speeding tickets.**

9. ANY SENTENCE BEGINNING WITH “BY”

They're not always wrong, but sentences beginning with “by” are so easy to mishandle they demand special caution.

***Hard way:* By pulling over young drivers more often than they pull over older drivers for speeding, traffic officers are prejudiced.**

Explaining what's wrong with this sentence is not easy, but if we reorganize the parts, we see clearly that traffic officers are not prejudiced by pulling over young drivers. That gets the causation backwards. Instead, they pull young drivers over because of their prejudice, which is very easy to say without confusion.

***Easy way:* Traffic officers who pull over young drivers more often than older drivers are prejudiced.**

Better yet, we can use a more powerful verb and still indicate the cause and effect.

***Easy way:* Age-biased officers pull over young drivers more often than older drivers.**

If you're not ready to abandon “by” clauses, put them where they belong.

***Easy way:* Age-biased officers discriminate against young drivers by pulling them over more often than older drivers.**