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Solving Common Writing Problems



Sharon Hamilton

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For the Student

Watch a second-grader frowning in concentration over the story he's printing letter by letter. Look over the shoulder of the middle-schooler writing her best friend a seven-page letter in different colored pens. Remember the last time, in the middle of recording a thought, you had that magic sensation of liftoff, of flying above the person hunched over the notebook or the word processor into some realm of the imagination. Writing can be a happy act. Like all art, it offers the chance to concentrate absolutely and to escape the confines of self.

Now remember the last time that writing was not pleasure but agony. You're staring at your computer screen, palms damp and eyes aching. The clock is ticking, crumpled pages surround the wastebasket, and you've just deleted the last hour's stiff sentences. What has gone wrong? Self-consciousness has set in. Instead of focusing on what you want to say, perhaps imagining the face of your ideal reader, you're watching yourself write. That can be as disconcerting as listening to yourself speak. Your inspiration has evaporated and you feel like a cartoon character who's just run off a cliff and then remembers that he can't fly. The reason may be that you're thinking of the paper as the teacher's or the editor's, not your own, and trying to get it over with. You haven't given yourself enough chance to be spontaneous—to experiment, to go off on tangents, to dream.

Thinking on Paper

Instead, why not try to re-create the conditions that make writing a pleasure? Give up the idea that the ideal paper is a one-draft wonder. Sometimes one draft is enough, if the piece is short and the focus narrow. But that's a happy accident, not a method. The purpose of putting your first words on a page should be to explore as many possibilities as you can—to figure out what you feel about the topic. Invent ways to help yourself think on paper: Describe a character in a string of adjectives; try stating the main point of your argument; pick a relevant word—patriotism, Ophelia, fear; set your alarm for fifteen minutes and write nonstop. Forget about spelling and grammar; just keep that pen moving. And keep asking yourself questions: What does this word mean? Is this speaker sincere? Why is the writer using that tone? How else could this plot have ended? What am I trying to prove? And how can I explain it, not to my teacher but to a bright classmate? This is free writing. Listen to Charles Darwin, who had the rare distinction of being both an innovative scientist and an accomplished humanist, as he describes his own discovery of free writing's value:

Formerly I used to think about my sentences before writing them down; but for several years I have found that it saves time to scribble in a vile hand, whole pages as quickly as I can, contracting half the words; and then correct deliberately. Sentences thus scribbled down are often better ones than I could have written deliberately.

(*Charles Darwin*, ed. Francis Darwin, 1892, p. 53)

In other words, the first step should be to generate notes, not finished copy. Then go away from the task for a while—go to soccer practice or do your math or wash the dishes. Your subconscious mind will continue to work on the paper. You may get an idea for it while you're running laps or falling asleep. If you do, write it down as soon as you can and add it to the earlier notes. When you come back to that material, it may strike you as either inspired or dull, ample or incomplete. You may decide that you need another note-taking session, to take notes on your notes. Even if not a single word from this process ends up in the final draft, the very act of writing will create confidence. You will have taken the first—and scariest—step: conquering the terror of the blank page. You will prove to yourself that you have something to say, and you may be curious about where it will lead. Your energy can go into how to link your thoughts instead of into producing and connecting and polishing them all at once.

Writing a Rough Draft

A rough draft is the unpolished version of your paper, like the sketch for a painting. Some words will still be wrong, some paragraphs will be out of order, some examples will be incomplete, but the general shape and content will be those of the final paper. The rough draft will be based at least in part on the lists and notes and paragraphs from the prewriting process. Before beginning to write it, look at that material: Is there some central idea that stands out? Can you express it in a clearer form now? Can you number the ideas in order of importance or, if you are writing about a work of fiction, of time? Can you see gaps in the reasoning process, examples that need filling in? Think of the paper not as a mold into which you pour ideas but as a design. Play with several different forms that it might take. Try out different beginnings and endings.

Now decide where to begin writing the paper, which is not necessarily at the beginning. Sometimes it's better to save a thesis paragraph or an opening scene for later, especially if you're vague about where a paper is going. To clarify that direction, try starting with a section that you feel sure about. Put any notes that could apply to that part in rough order, and keep glancing at them as you write.

The paper may change and grow—one idea can inspire another, and the final version may resemble only slightly the one that you first envisioned. You may get Darwin’s sense that you’re not so much thinking and recording as watching your hand skim over the page or the keyboard; two hours go by, and the rough draft has nearly written itself. If that small miracle happens, go along with it: once the inspiration is interrupted, it may be impossible to get it back. But if your energy runs out, don’t try to force it or to dash off the rest of the paper just to tell yourself it’s finished. The strain will show. Instead, take a break and come back when you’re feeling fresh. When you begin writing again, you may want to jump in at a new point—for example, with that elusive first paragraph. But don’t count on having another flight right away. Most good writing depends more on perspiration than inspiration, as Thomas Edison said of “genius.”

Becoming Your Own Editor

After the rough draft seems complete, take another break from it. Come back when you are feeling alert and critical. You’re about to switch roles, from writer to editor. This part of the writing process has its pleasures, too, like shaping a dance routine: the pride, maybe even the surprise, at what you’ve already accomplished, the challenge of polishing it, the satisfaction of seeing it take a more graceful form. Try to read the piece as if someone else had written it: If it is an essay, does it have a thesis—a strong central point? Does every paragraph begin with a topic sentence that develops that thesis? Are the supporting examples relevant? Are the quotations brief and smoothly integrated into your own sentences? If it is a story, does it show something moving and convincing about people? Does it overstate a point or tell too much—become more essay than story? Are there any parts that sound unclear or incomplete or out of place?

Every writer has to see his or her work through this stage. A published piece looks so inevitable that it’s easy to believe it just flowed from the author’s pen. But pages from writers’ notebooks are full of crossed-out words, inserted sentences, and relocated paragraphs—like most of ours. There is no formula, no generic best style. If there were, Charles Dickens would be indistinguishable from Emily Dickinson, and books might as well be turned out by the novel-writing machines that George Orwell describes in *1984*. What every writer has to offer is a unique experience—whether of reading Shakespeare or of falling in love—told in his or her own voice. Your written voice should be a polished version of your spoken voice, as individual and as bold.

The final step in the writing process is to do that polishing: to proofread for the mechanical errors and stylistic faults that distract your reader and lessen your authority. Are there places where you’re not sure of a spelling, a semicolon, a

sentence structure? Try to resist the temptation to make up a rule for some point that you're not sure about—for example, “Uh, where does the comma go in this sentence? I know: I'll put it after the noun—no, after every time I take a breath. That should do it.” (Wrong.) Then you follow the made-up principle, all the time knowing that you're not only avoiding the search for the right answer but also making it twice as hard to learn once you've found it. If your teacher makes no comment on that point, you still won't be sure: Maybe she just didn't notice. If she marks something that you could have fixed, it's a waste of her time and yours. Instead, look up the correct form in a dictionary or a handbook like this one. That takes effort, but it teaches you much more than just squinting and gliding past a possible error. In other words, make wiser use of your editing self: Hand in your best work and aim to make it even better.

To be an accomplished writer, you do not have to take a formal course or know how to name every error. But you do need a sense for when something is either incorrect or ineffective, and some idea of how to improve it. *Solving Common Writing Problems*, like its companion guide, *Solving More Common Writing Problems*, can help: to categorize problems, to make you see them as patterns rather than as isolated examples, to suggest rules that keep you from falling into those traps again, to show you when there are choices about how to express an idea. The books present a consensus on what constitutes clear and effective writing in our own time and place. *Solving Common Writing Problems* concentrates on the criteria for correctness, the copy editor's usual province: punctuation, spelling, and syntax. *Solving More Common Writing Problems* focuses on the larger conceptual issues, such as clarity, coherence, and development, as well as on effective word choice. It also includes a section on becoming your own editor. The main purpose of both books is to encourage in you confidence that what you have to say is worth hearing and pride in mastering the skills to say it well.

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Editing Symbols

Agr1	Agreement: noun-pronoun	“ ”	Quotation marks
Agr2	Agreement: subject-verb	Quot	Using quotations
Ap	Apostrophe	Read	Reading actively
Awk	Awkward	Red	Redundancy
Cap	Capitalization	Ref	Pronoun reference
Clar	Clarity	Rep	Repetition
Cliché	Cliché	RO	Run-on sentence
Coh	Coherence	;/	Semicolon
:/	Colon	Shift	Shifted construction
,/	Comma	Sp	Spelling error
Coor	Weak coordination	Sub	Weak subordination
Crit	Using critical sources	Syll	Syllable break
DM, MM	Dangling modifier; Misplaced modifier	T	Verb tense
--/	Dash	Thesis	Thesis
Dev	Development	Thesis ¶	Thesis paragraph
D	Diction	Title 1	Titles of published works
Emph	Emphasis	Title 2	Title of your own paper
Expec	Fulfilling expectations	Trans	Transition
Frag	Sentence fragment	Vague	Vague word
Hyph	Hyphen	Var	Sentence variety
Lazy	Avoiding lazy habits	Wdy	Wordy
Met	Mixed metaphor	WW	Wrong word
Mod	Finding models	X	Proofreading error
Num	Numbers	h	Small letter needed (<i>h</i>)
¶	Paragraphing	<u>h</u>	Capital letter needed (<i>H</i>)
Para	Parallelism	redieve	Transpose letters (<i>receive</i>)
Pass	Passive voice	yourname	Space needed between words
Pp	Page reference	^	Insert a word or a letter
Plag	Plagiarism	really	Delete word(s)

For the Teacher

Young writers need encouragement as well as criticism. When I started teaching, I marked only the errors in the margins of students' papers, saving any praise for the comment at the end. Returning papers, I was puzzled by the looks of dismay even from students who had succeeded on an assignment. Later I discovered that all that had gotten through to them was the negative feedback. Often they were not sure of what they had done right—of why a particular sentence pattern was effective or a semicolon usage was correct. I had assumed that, having written it, they already knew. But writing, like any craft, depends partly on training. Novices tend to dismiss the worth of instinctive skill because it comes easily to them. At the opposite extreme, they may strain after an effect—a passive construction, a convoluted sentence—because it does not come naturally. Especially at the beginning, writers need an objective evaluation of their work that credits what they are already doing well. “For the Student” discusses the process of writing a paper—recording ideas, shaping and expanding them, polishing the draft. This section concentrates on the role of the teacher in evaluating that work.

Grading Papers

Students need to be assured that there is no formula for good writing, that style is as individualized as vocal tone. The student's task is to discover his or her best style; the teacher's is to guide that effort. In other words, the aim of a writing class should not be to train everyone to sound alike—to write like the star student or like Joan Didion or Samuel Johnson or the teacher. How can a teacher signal quickly and efficiently to students that they are writing well? I use a technique first suggested to me by my late husband, who was also an English teacher: to comment in different colors. I underline in green ink the strongest parts of a paper—a word, a sentence, a whole paragraph. Any part that needs revising I mark in red. Sometimes, for example, a whole sentence is in green except for one word—a misspelling, a faulty pronoun reference. Sometimes a longer phrase is marked in red—a misplaced modifier, an unemphatic conclusion. I categorize the writing problems according to the symbols used in this book (for example, “Ref” for “Pronoun reference”) and write the symbol in the margin. Sections that are adequate—neither ineffective nor outstanding—I leave alone. To lighten the tone of this process, and to remind students that an actual person is reading their work, I also draw a smiley face by any line that amuses me. That is an appreciative editor's note. More rarely, I draw a frowning face at a terrible pun or an outrageous stance. Students look for those little cartoons, and often add their own versions to notes they write to me. I once

overheard two boys comparing the short stories I had just returned: “Hey, I got a smiley face!” “Oh, yeah? I got three.”

As I read a paper, I make a list of its positive and negative qualities, usually in two columns headed “plus” and “minus.” For the final comment, I use that list to summarize the paper’s strengths and weaknesses—this time in blue ink. I used to do the final comment in red, until a beset student told me that, no matter how strong the words of praise, the message of the red ink prevailed. When I have finished, my student and I can get an overview of the paper at a glance, with the green sections serving as inspiration. The writer therefore becomes his or her own model stylist: John can see the best John parts, Rachel the best Rachel effects, and each can attempt to emulate those in the future.

The final step is to assign the paper a grade: a letter that summarizes the balance between its strengths and weaknesses. I used to find that that little letter was the part of the comment I hesitated over longest and was most prone to regret. In other words, I am usually surer about how to evaluate a paper than about what grade to assign it. The reason, I have come to realize, is that no paper exists in a vacuum: Grades are comparative. They are based on three different and sometimes conflicting standards. First, there is the absolute value of the piece of writing—an ideal of coherence, development, articulateness, and mechanical correctness. The second criterion is the way that past students have performed on similar assignments. Finally, I must take into account the response of the current class to the assignment.

The comparative nature of grades gets confirmed for any teacher who has read SAT II or English Advanced Placement essays for the College Board. The Educational Testing Service trains readers to arrive at common standards by having them compare their grades on a series of actual responses to the essay question they are rating. Most teachers begin by grading either too high or too low—by having either exaggerated or condescending expectations. Only after rating and comparing twenty to twenty-five actual essays, and noting the marks of their fellow readers and the ETS Chief Readers, do the teachers begin grading essays on their own. Throughout the week of marathon reading, the leaders institute several checks on the process, always involving an evaluation of an actual student sample. As much as possible, they try to dispel the effects of fatigue, tedium, and random selection.

On class sets of papers, the conditions are different: No teacher has the range or number of writers that an ETS reading involves, but each does have the context of his or her students’ abilities and of the preparation that went into the assignment. Still, the comparative method can work. I usually start by reading two or three papers by strong students, to get a sense of the top range, and then a few

by struggling writers. In my final comment, I try to be fair but frank, to ignore predetermined expectations and to meet each paper on its own grounds. I assign the grade—more often, a range of grades—in light pencil. Sometimes I have to read an entire set, and reread some of the early papers, before committing myself to a grade on a particular paper. Meanwhile, I keep a list of problems and successes—a whole-class equivalent of the scratch outline I make for individual papers. As I read, I am developing a sense of the class's overall performance on the assignment.

Returning Papers

I used to return papers quickly and quietly at the end of a class. The communication between the student and me was entirely through the written word and directed only at the individual. The return also marked the end of the assignment: That paper was declared finished, and we went on to the next. I sensed how teacher-centered and incomplete that process was: Discouraged students sometimes did no more than skim my labored-over comment, grimace at the grade, and toss the paper into the wastebasket on the way out of class. Their next paper would have many of the same faults as the previous one. Occasionally, though, someone would stay after class to ask about a comment, explain a choice of word or organization, or arrange to do a revision. I noticed that those writers often made substantial progress. I asked myself how I could use what they were doing to help more of my students improve.

Now when I return a set of papers, I explain the criteria that I used for judging them. I also explain that the grade is a summary, a compromise: a “B” may be based on different factors for different papers. One may have imaginative ideas but incoherent organization, another a subtle thesis but thin supporting evidence, a third strong content but an awkward or error-ridden style.

I also try to make every submission of papers a celebration of student writing. The means depends on the kind of assignment. For a personal essay or a short story, I sometimes read the first sentence from three successful ones and ask the class to vote for the entire paper that they are most eager to hear. We talk about the “hook” in each of the three opening sentences. Then the paper that got the most votes is read aloud. I prefer that the writer do the reading, both so that I can hear his or her inflections and so that I can note the reactions of the class. Often, the delivery of a key line or the rapt attention of the other students has increased my own appreciation. If the writer wants to remain anonymous, however, I or a student volunteer reads the paper.

Analytical essays are usually too hard for students to take in when they are read aloud, especially in their entirety. So I ask students to pair up, usually with

someone who has written on a similar topic, read the partner's paper, and then write a comment and sign it. The comment should be kept simple—one positive and one negative point. Or it may take the form of a writing workshop kind of response: “What I hear you saying is . . .,” “What I still want to know is” This method is called peer editing. For the reader, it provides a specific example of a classmate's work and puts him or her in the position of the teacher who must grade the paper. In other words, it promotes empathy for both the other student and the teacher. For the writer, the value depends on the astuteness of the peer editor. As a check on the process, I mark the comment when I read the paper, underlining in green any point that I agree with, and in red any that I think is mistaken.

A third method of celebration, particularly for expository essays, is to share strong excerpts from several of them. As I read a set of papers, I keep a list of effective sections: e.g., “strong thesis, Beth, Jim,” “good use of quotations, Mike, p. 3, Ali, p. 2.” Some excellent writers could model virtually any aspect, so I try to save their work for the most subtle or demanding. After I finish grading, I go back and choose the best excerpts from several papers, anything from a sentence to an entire paragraph, trying especially hard to include one from a student who has been struggling. I mark the strong sections with brackets and then number them in a sequence that creates, roughly, a collective essay: thesis paragraph from one or two papers, clear topic sentence from another, fine supporting details from a third, all the way down to variations on the conclusion. After students have read the excerpts aloud, I tell them: “This is all ‘A’ material.” I also assure them that no one student could be expected to generate all of it, but at least now they have models for what is possible. Besides allowing for peer inspiration, this technique also provides a chance for recognition. Reading even a single good sentence to appreciative classmates can give a student confidence. Finally, I encourage writers to submit strong papers for publication in the school literary magazine or in one of the numerous journals or contests that accept student writing.

Students may not always be pleased with their grades, but they should end up feeling that the grades are fair, based on clear criteria and applied objectively to everyone. As I once heard a speaker say at a writing workshop, like them or hate them, grades are the currency in which teachers and students deal. If we cheapen that currency by being too lenient or by failing to specify the standards on which it is based, we deny students the chance to gauge the true value of their work.

Revising Papers

Students also need to profit from their mistakes: to correct errors, expand on ideas, and learn from direct experience that writing is a process. Few pieces are finished in a single draft: The exception is work written in class—tests or full-period essays. I do not ask students to correct such papers because, in later life as in school, writers must let some work go after one draft. I do find, though, that in-class writing gets more fluent and more correct as students revise their outside work. The red marks in the margin and the final comment show students what needs changing. To guide them, I require one of two different levels of revision. The choice depends on the nature of the assignment and the schedule.

On all papers done at home, the minimum requirement is to correct errors in style and mechanics—any fault that can be fixed in one sentence or less. The process works like this: On the original paper, students number each error that I have marked. Since all are keyed to *Solving Common Writing Problems* and *Solving More Common Writing Problems*, the students' first responsibility is to look up the description of the error and the explanations for ways to correct it. Then, either on a separate sheet of paper or on a new word-processed draft, they name the faulty mark of punctuation, word, or sentence; give it the same number as the original; and write it correctly. See "Using This Book" for specific examples. Thus, students learn to become their own copy editors.

If there are symbols that they do not understand or do not agree with, they may write a question or a comment at that number. This correction format provides for a dialogue on paper, of the same sort that takes place between a professional writer and an editor. The corrections are due within two class periods of the day that I return the paper. Next, I correct the corrections—check or spot-check them and mark in red any that still need revision. Students get an effort grade—anything from a 0 if they do not turn in the assignment to a + if they do a thorough and accurate job. This mark does not alter their grade on the paper, but it does count in the effort component of the semester grade. A variation on this technique is to give a grade on the paper only after the corrections have been done.

The higher level of rewriting involves not simply correction but also revision: making such major changes as strengthening the thesis, adding to the supporting evidence, improving the coherence, developing a new conclusion: the faults that are described in *Solving More Common Writing Problems*. In other words, "revision" means making changes that create a more substantial, more logical draft. In the process, students must also do "corrections"—fix the small faults. I make the complete rewrite optional. My reasoning is that nearly all students can benefit from correcting their errors. But, after several years of requiring

everyone to do rewrites and then trying to cope with the lackluster results, I admitted that only those truly engaged in a particular paper benefit. Since my own time is limited, I would rather invest it in writing that has a solid effort behind it. Students have a week from the day that the paper is returned to submit the new draft, which they turn in along with the original. The final grade, based partly on the degree of improvement, is the average of the grades on the original paper and the revision.

The rewrite process does not always go smoothly. Some students make such minimal changes that they are, in effect, copy editing rather than rewriting. If that happens, I note it in the comment and give credit only for corrections. In rare cases, students misunderstand a directive and produce a “revision” that is not as strong as the original. But that, too, is a learning experience. The main objective is for students to become more aware of their own stylistic patterns and better able to act as their own editors.

The next stage is providing additional practice on errors that persist. At the beginning, students often see a paper as a convoluted whole and so feel overwhelmed by the writing process. As when learning any new skill, they need to have it broken down into its components and to master it in stages. Simply putting clear labels on problems allows students to see them as distinct entities—the first step in learning to edit them. For example, the first time that a teacher wrote “wordy” on one of my papers, I had no idea what she meant. Once she explained how including excess words could cloud meaning, I became more conscious of that tendency in my style. I began to look for models of conciseness, in my own writing and in others’, and to strive, especially in the revision stage, for terseness.

When I became a teacher myself, I felt overwhelmed in turn by the barriers to clear meaning in my students’ papers. Wordiness I could recognize, but what could I say about the first sentence in the first paper that I attempted to grade: “The English language is an interesting conversation piece”? *Now* I would realize that the student had taken on too grandiose a topic—I had made the assignment too broad—and was trying to mask his insecurity with verbiage: a vague compliment (“interesting”—*Vague word*) and an impressive phrase (“conversation piece”) that he did not understand (*Wrong word*). But it took many years of teaching before I could recognize such writing problems and devise guidelines to help students correct them. I needed a book that would support that undertaking: one that would provide brief descriptions of the errors my students were making and clear explanations of how to correct them. Many of the textbooks I tried were too complicated and too heavy for easy access. Nor did they provide the additional exercises that writers need to reinforce rules and concepts.

Solving Common Writing Problems and *Solving More Common Writing Problems* grew out of the attempt to serve those needs, for myself and for other teachers.

Using This Book

Solving Common Writing Problems has two main purposes: For all students, it is meant to categorize and describe common faults in style and mechanics and to suggest strategies for writing more effectively. For some, it can also provide additional help on persistent problems. In practice, that means that the teacher keys comments on papers to the alphabetized index on page *xi*. All students should be provided with a copy of that list. This volume covers the criteria for correctness in the mechanics of spelling and punctuation, and in syntax. Some teachers may want to reproduce the book in sections, as they apply to the needs of individual students or of a class. Others may prefer to use it as a textbook and order copies for each student or sets for the entire school. On returning a set of papers, the teacher should call attention to a problem that is widespread. For example, “Check to see if this symbol, ‘Para,’ is written on your paper. Now, who can tell me what it stands for?” The teacher can then cite some examples from the papers, and ask everyone to read and discuss the relevant section of the book. Full credit for the revision process should require paying special attention to parallel sentence structure. Periodic tests and the final exam should contain examples of lapses in parallelism for students to correct.

The other type of writing problem concerns a point of style or mechanics. Again, when a student finds a particular correction symbol in the margin of the paper, the first step is to check the description of the problem in this book. For example, one student wrote: “A writer should be careful of their diction.” I underlined “their” in red and wrote “Agr1” (for “Noun-pronoun agreement”) in the margin. The student then found “Agr1” in the list of correction symbols. After reading the whole description, he located the section relevant to this error—a singular noun takes a singular pronoun. He numbered the red symbol on his paper, on a separate sheet wrote the same number, the phrase “Noun-pronoun agreement,” and a corrected form of the sentence—“Writers should be careful of their diction.” An alternative format is for the student to word-process and correct the new copy, again numbering both drafts. The teacher then checks or spot-checks the corrections, for both accuracy and completeness.

But one correction is seldom sufficient to teach students to avoid an error. Since one’s writing style comprises many facets, and is the product of an entire thought process, it often takes repeated practice to alter set patterns. If a student is unable to do one kind of correction, or if the error recurs on subsequent papers, he or she should also be assigned a practice exercise on that problem. If, as is often the case, several problems occur, it is generally more

effective to choose one for more intensive practice than to try to deal with all at the same time. After the teacher checks the supplementary exercise, the student may need to correct additional errors or to have a brief conference on any examples that continue to be puzzling.

If several students are having a particular problem, for example, comma usage, the teacher might set a “challenge of the week,” introducing the rules on successive Fridays. For example, the first week might stress the comma before and after a term of address: “Hey, Tom, I like that idea!”; “Did you mean, you naughty girl, to break that vase?” Once a concept had been introduced, errors in it would be marked in special ink—say, orange—on future papers. After all the major rules had been introduced, the class would have a quiz, based on the practice exercise. The skill would be tested again on a final exam.

An alternative approach is group work for several students who are experiencing the same writing problem. For example, three students who persist in writing run-on sentences would do a practice exercise as homework. In class, they would be given time to compare their answers and to check with the teacher about any remaining uncertainties. They would then teach the concept to the class, including some of the examples from the practice exercise. The concept and practice of avoiding run-ons would be tested later on a quiz and a final exam.

In other words, the means of using this book will vary with the needs of the teacher and the class. Some students may do no more than consult the book on a few key problems. Others will use it repeatedly, and do several of the supplementary exercises as well. Some teachers will need the book primarily to clarify and reinforce points made in class. Others will use it for help with several skills or concepts. Some will find the method of reproducing individual pages sufficient for their needs. Others will want each of their students to have a bound copy of the text. I anticipate this variety based on my own experience in teaching writing over several years to students of different ability levels: Sometimes it was not until I saw a fault described that I was aware it existed. Sometimes I understood the definition of a problem but needed several clear examples to demonstrate how it might be corrected. The combination of focusing on problems that the class as a whole is having and of working with individual students should allow the teacher flexibility. All these uses are meant to further the goals introduced in the essay “For the Student” that begins this book: to recognize that writing is not a single skill but a complex process. It must be mastered gradually, ideally without losing the enthusiasm and pride of accomplishment that mark our first childish attempts at it. *Solving Common Writing Problems* and its companion guide were written in the hope of making that mastery more sure, for students and their teachers.

9. Dangling modifier; Misplaced modifier

Usually we expect a word or a phrase to modify the element of a sentence that is closest to it. If, instead, the element to be modified is missing or the modifier is out of its logical order—if it is “misplaced”—the meaning can be confused or unintentionally comic.

Dangling modifier

A dangling modifier is the most common fault of sentence logic. It occurs when the noun that a phrase or clause is meant to modify is not stated outright. The modifier “dangles” without the subject that should link it to the rest of the sentence.

Test for this fault by checking the noun closest to the modifier. Does the modifier really describe it? Or, instead, does it describe some implied but unstated subject? Usually the writer has a connection in mind, and the reader can puzzle it out. But, taken literally, sentences with dangling modifiers are nonsensical.

If the modifier is misplaced, the meaning can be confused or comic.

Dangling modifier: After passing over the bridge, the small town began to stretch out in front of us.

Here, the small town is driving in to see itself. Revise to make the passengers the subject of the main clause:

✓ **Revised:** After passing over the bridge, we saw the small town stretched out in front of us.

Dangling modifier: Young and inexperienced, the task looked easy to me.

The task, not the doer, seems to be the novice. Turn the opening phrase into a dependent clause:

✓ **Revised:** Because I was young and inexperienced, the task looked easy to me.

✓ **Revised:** Young and inexperienced, I thought that the task looked easy.

Dangling modifier: To increase speed, sprints should be done daily.

The sprints, not the runners, seem to be in need of exercise. Supply the missing noun:

✓ **Revised:** To increase their speed, runners should do sprints daily.

9. Dangling modifier; Misplaced modifier (*continued*)

Dangling modifier: Ravenous after the long hike, the soggy spaghetti looked delicious.

The hikers, not the noodles, have acquired the enormous appetites. Get the real doers into the opening clause:

✓ **Revised:** Ravenous after the long hike, we agreed that the soggy spaghetti looked delicious.

✓ **Revised:** We were so ravenous after the long hike that the soggy spaghetti looked delicious.

Misplaced modifier (MM)

1. Sometimes the misplaced modifier is a single word. The most common of these is *only*. Notice the different meanings “only” assumes as it changes position in the same sentence:

Only, Chris liked pancakes. (He finds them delicious in spite of their richness.)

Only Chris liked pancakes. (The rest preferred oatmeal.)

Chris only liked pancakes. (He did not love them.)

Chris liked only pancakes. (He relished that food alone.)

Since *only* may be either an adjective or an adverb, it has unusual mobility. Make sure that it has not moved to a part of your sentence that changes the sentence’s meaning.

Other single-word modifiers that can easily get misplaced include *even*, *just*, *simply*, and *nearly*.

Misplaced: Martha even worries a month before a recital. (She has other extraordinary feelings, too?)

✓ **Clear:** Martha worries even a month before a recital.

Misplaced: He didn’t just mean “soon,” he meant now. (He implied other meanings, too?)

✓ **Clear:** He didn’t mean just “soon,” he meant now.

2. *Hopefully* is another modifier that is commonly misused. It has legitimate uses as an adverb. For example:

They groped up the trail cautiously but hopefully.

But nowadays, especially in spoken English, it often dangles like this:

Hopefully, we can agree on some new rules.

9. Dangling modifier; Misplaced modifier (continued)

This wording describes the optimistic mood of the parties involved, not the wish of the speaker. The correct sentence should read:

I am hopeful that (or, I hope that) we can agree on some new rules.

3. A phrase that modifies the wrong noun or phrase can create an awkward or comic effect.

Misplaced: The congressman was accused of smearing the First Lady on the House floor.

✓ **Clear:** The congressman was accused on the House floor of smearing the First Lady.

Misplaced: She wanted a dog that had long hair, high intelligence, and a pedigree weighing about fifty pounds.

✓ **Clear:** She wanted a dog that weighed about fifty pounds and had long hair, high intelligence, and a pedigree.

4. Split infinitives occur when the parts of an infinitive—the word *to* plus the basic form of a verb, as in *to run*, *to speak*—are separated by modifiers. Although that practice is common in speech, it creates an awkward effect and should usually be avoided in writing.

Split Infinitive: He wanted me to carefully consider before I signed up for calculus.

✓ **Clear:** He wanted me to consider carefully before I signed up for calculus.

Split Infinitive: She was able to more effectively operate when she had had at least seven hours' sleep.

✓ **Clear:** She was able to operate more effectively when she had had at least seven hours' sleep.

Sometimes, though, the split infinitive is less wordy or less awkward than the more strictly correct form. In such cases, it is preferable to keep it:

Jim hopes to more than double his score in the next round.

She hesitated to actually carry out the threat.

9. Dangling modifier; Misplaced modifier

Dangling modifier

Rewrite each of the following sentences to correct the dangling modifiers.

1. Driving by the old house, the damage from the fire was clear.
2. By acting this way toward a talented rival, her vanity is revealed.
3. Angry and frustrated, the fight broke out quickly.
4. Feeling ashamed and embarrassed, a lump grew in my throat.
5. A careful and modest student, the report was brief and to the point.
6. Even before entering the building, the smell of onions and spices was striking.

Misplaced modifier

Rewrite each of the following sentences to correct the misplaced modifier.

7. These actors only appear a few times in the film.
8. This marks the first time that the narrator reasserts her presence in several pages.
9. The audience just gets one perspective on the fight.
10. This episode helps the reader to more sympathetically judge Lady Macbeth's nature.
11. Jen wanted to always be first in line.
12. The director chose to only keep a small number of the original lines from the play.
13. Hopefully, the team would have a winning season.
14. Alice served soda to her guests in plastic cups.
15. Practicing every day will hopefully improve Marty's running times.