



FROM THE DESK OF THE WRITING SPECIALIST

## Double Talk and Twisted Thought: Reflections on Incoherence

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What writing teacher has not encountered bizarre and incoherent sentences, sentences that seem to teeter on the very edges of syntactic and semantic psychosis?

- Common to these cases' doormen were the last possible stop the process server could reach due to security.
- Even this act of God is limited in its application being that the effects of the sun's rays could have only affected his distance for a very short distance of roadway, a part of the roadway which, unfortunately, collided with Anderson's fate.

Sentences like these induce feelings of panic and incompetence. We place question marks in the margins and move on, finding it too difficult to pinpoint the error and too exhausting to make sense of the text, to second-guess its intended meaning, on the basis of the syntactic and semantic clues given. And yet many writing teachers think that there is logic to illogical prose, a logic that we

can infer from error analysis and use to thwart incoherence.<sup>1</sup> The rest of this piece describes some of these errors.

Diction errors are a frequent source of incoherence. When the relationship between a word and some other part of the sentence is ambiguous or nonsensical, the meaning of the sentence may become unfathomable. Some diction errors, especially those that result from auditory mistakes, are seriously funny: “The student who objected most strenuously to prayer at graduation was the school’s valid victorian.” Spelling errors can also produce some howlers.

- A citizen’s fourth amendment right should not be violated by an arbitrary search for contraband simply because a traffic patrolman has a subjective haunch.
- The doctor testified the brake on the leg was about two weeks old.
- The court’s colander was full.

Some errors stem from inadequate vocabulary. The student may be guessing at the correct word or the correct form of the word, as in “The prosecutor’s argument was circulatory.” A related error stems from a novice law student’s weak grasp of legal discourse.

- It was unreasonable to hold the social hosts liable for negligence caused by the guest that they did not proximately cause. (Not only is the student confused about whether you proximately cause negligence or proximately cause injuries, but the misplaced modifier compounds that confusion by suggesting the hosts “proximately caused the guest.” Thus does incoherence mount.)
- According to id, the substituted service was valid. (The superego argued otherwise.)

Some sentences lose coherence because the writer blurs expressions, erroneously combining or omitting features of similar sounding phrases. This is an error foreign students often make.

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<sup>1</sup> Mina Shaughnessy addresses the underlying causes of incoherence in *ERRORS & EXPECTATIONS* (1977), as does David Bartholomae in *The Study of Error*, in *THE WRITING TEACHER’S SOURCEBOOK* (3d ed. 1994). Claire K. Cook’s *THE MLA’S LINE BY LINE* (1985) is a good reference book to consult when diagnosing problem sentences.

- If crimes decrease, at least I can say is that the law worked. (The writer confuses “At least I can say that . . .” with “the least I can say is . . .”)

Thus, the coherence of a sentence can falter when a student doesn’t really understand a word he is using, doesn’t know the grammatically appropriate form of that word for the sentence, or mishears a word or misspells it by substituting a word or an expression that sounds familiar.

Some incoherence is accidental. The mind rushes faster than the hand and errors are produced that stem less from syntactic or semantic ignorance than from indifferent revision and careless proofreading.

- The deceased, a state trooper, was hit while assisting a motorist on the side of the thruway.
- Because Murray was driving with the flow of traffic, he did not realize his failure to wear sunglasses would render him unable to see the state trooper.

Most students realize that a deceased person is unlikely to assist a motorist, that the subject cannot perform the action the verb asserts it does (barring the student who wrote, “we can argue the victim is not dead”). Most students even realize that the flow of traffic is not an obvious reason for not wearing sunglasses – if it is pointed out to them.

A less common, but still frequent, accidental error results when there is a disjunction between the subject of the sentence and its predicate nominative (a.k.a. subjective complement). A predicate nominative follows a linking verb and is supposed to describe the subject, though some do not.

- Doormen authorized to accept mail deliveries constitute proper service-of-process.

Just as it is illogical to compare apples and oranges, so it is illogical for a subject and its predicate nominative to be different animals. A doorman is not “service of process.”<sup>2</sup>

Confusion also results when a writer leaves out words that glue the pieces of a sentence together.

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<sup>2</sup> Nor can “a roadway collide with fate,” as the author of one of our opening examples asserts.

- A doorman's duty to accept packages and lack of access to the actual resident make doormen proper people to receive substituted service.

It is not the doorman who lacks access to the resident. For the sentence to make sense, the appropriate possessive noun needs to be inserted, "a process server's lack of access."

Many of these errors can be corrected when a writer slows down enough to read what is actually on the page rather than in the head. Placing a ruler under a line of text often ensures careful line editing and proofreading because it keeps the eye from rushing ahead.

The most bewildering forms of incoherence are created by syntactic errors, by confused relationships between sentences or between the parts of sentences. An inability to subordinate syntactically one idea to another or to join two ideas of equal significance cause what Mina Shaughnessy calls "consolidation errors," errors that result from attempts to consolidate sentences in order to express relationships or to eliminate redundancy.

Coordination allows writers to link sentences or parts of sentences by grafting part of one sentence onto another. Students often become confused, however, about which parts of the sentence compose the base construction and which are the coordinated elements.

- He alleged that these noises have taken place for over 16 months and complained to the tenants upstairs.

In this sentence, it is syntactically unclear if "and" is compounding the verbs "have taken place" and "complained," or "alleged" and "complained." Although the writer probably wanted coordination within the "that" clause (he alleged two things), the subject of the "that" clause (noise) cannot perform the second action (complained). To coordinate this sentence, the author has to begin the symmetrical construction in a different place.

- He alleged that these noises have taken place for over 16 months and that he has complained to the tenants upstairs.

Like coordination, subordination allows a writer to add parts to the base sentence. The writer can open with introductory phrases or subordinate clauses, insert interruptions into the base sentence, or modify elements of the base sentence. Yet inexperienced writers often have difficulty managing the subordinate structures they introduce. Sometimes students create structural expectations that

are never fulfilled, as in “Testifying against her father it was traumatic.” Because “testifying against her father” is a gerund – a subject, not a participial phrase – the reader expects a verb to follow rather than “it,” another subject. The writer needs to eliminate the redundant subject or to create a participial phrase that leads into an independent sentence: “By testifying against her father, she was traumatized.” Some writers lose the subject when they open with introductory, subordinate clauses: “Even if he confessed, as the officer testified, was not mirandized.” Here, the writer needs a subject for the verb in the independent clause.

Modifiers can also blur the relationships between the parts of a sentence.

- A key aspect of the deposition that his lawyers overlooked was the lighting conditions.

It is unclear whether the modifier “that his lawyer overlooked” goes to “aspect” or “deposition.” When a prepositional phrase separates a noun from its modifier, students should eliminate the prepositional phrase or relocate it.

- A key aspect that the lawyer overlooked in the deposition was the lighting conditions.

Incoherence invariably results when the writer is still fuzzy about the point of the sentence.

- Common to these cases’ doormen were the last possible stop the process server could reach due to security.

Although the writer ought to be talking about what is common to these cases (namely, that doormen stopped process servers for security reasons), the writer opens instead with an assertion about what is common to doormen. The misemphasis derails the sentence.

We cannot make much headway against syntactic incoherence if all we can say to students is that this sentence doesn’t make sense. We must offer explanations as to why, and these explanations will involve teaching students about the parts of a sentence and about common arrangements of those parts. Even then, our task is not done – for diction errors often compound syntactical errors and create further obscurities. Moreover, when these mistakes are made within the context of paragraphs, so that incoherence within a sentence pushes paragraph coherence into the remote future, our problems multiply – as does frustration and despondency. Then we must remind ourselves and our students that, like recovering alcoholics, we are embarked on a twelve-step program and take one correction at a time.