

Writing and Tutorial Center

Untangling Complex Sentences

Often when people write, they start a sentence with one idea but don't continue with that idea logically for the rest of the sentence. They also might assume the reader knows unprovided details, leaving the sentence vague and foggy. It's a great idea to read your writing aloud to yourself or to someone else to check for sentences that are confusing or illogical. Here is a chart that shows some of the main ways that sentences can become tangled and unclear:

CHART

Tangle Type	What It Is	Common Clues
Mixed Construction	Sentence begins one way but shifts structure or logic midstream	"The reason is because...", gerund after noun clause, mismatched grammar pieces
Unclear Pronoun or Reference	The referent of it, this, that, they, etc. is ambiguous or missing	Too many nouns before a pronoun; vague "this" at the start of a sentence
Illogical Comparison	Compares unlike things or mismatches what's being compared	"This novel is better than Shakespeare" (author vs. book)
Overloaded Structure / Run-On	Too many ideas in one sentence without clear structure	Long chains of clauses, missing punctuation, breathless or tangled rhythm

Here are some examples of each of these types of tangles, with explanations and revisions:

MIXED CONSTRUCTION

Incorrect: The reason she left was because of wanting to find a new job.

Why it's confusing: This sentence starts as if it will explain a reason ("The reason she left was...") but then shifts into a gerund (-ing form) phrase ("because of wanting"), creating a mismatch in structure and tone.

Clearer version: The reason she left was that she wanted to find a new job.

[or, even better]

She left because she wanted to find a new job.

UNCLEAR PRONOUN OR REFERENCE

Incorrect: The committee questioned the relevance of her proposal. This highlighted a deeper issue.

Why it's confusing: We don't know what "this" refers to here: the committee's question, the relevance, or the proposal. We can guess, but we don't know for sure.

Clearer version: The committee questioned the relevance of her proposal. Their question highlighted a deeper issue: her lack of research.

ILLOGICAL COMPARISON

Incorrect: His painting is more mysterious than Van Gogh.

Why it's confusing: This compares a painting to a person, which is illogical. The comparison should be between similar categories (e.g. painting to painting).

Clearer version: His painting is more mysterious than Van Gogh's work.

[or]

His painting is more mysterious than any painting by Van Gogh.

OVERLOADED STRUCTURE OR RUN-ON

Incorrect: She wanted to study design because she liked fashion but also architecture and the way space could tell stories and make people feel things so now she's thinking about interior design or maybe even stage sets.

Why it's confusing: This sentence tries to pack too many ideas into one breathless structure. It needs punctuation and transitions to guide the reader!

Clearer version: She wanted to study design because she liked fashion and architecture. She was especially drawn to how space could tell stories and evoke emotions. Now, she's considering interior design—or even stage set design.

Your turn! Identify the type of tangle in each sentence and revise it to be as clear as possible:

For most game designers who want to design non-violent games run the risk of not being marketable.

When an interior designer chooses a color is the most important step in the process.

The client decided that the designer's idea would not be rehired.

Architects, a difficult profession, requires both visual and mathematics skills.

The designer integrated natural materials with industrial elements. This became their signature style.

She told him the story, but this confused everyone.

Whether the artist chooses abstraction or realism is an important decision that reflects their vision should be carefully considered.

This painting is more innovative than Picasso.

The designer showed the model to the professor, and he praised its innovation.

To fully appreciate Bauhaus principles requires studying its historical context and one must visit relevant exhibitions.

Conceptual art is when there doesn't need to be a physical art piece.

Digital design is faster than pencils.

In minimalist design, creators strip away unnecessary elements rather than by maximalist approaches which layer multiple decorative components.

In a greenwashing strategy, companies try to improve their image rather than by the renewable strategy in which they actually make changes to the ways they create and promote their products.

The museum features both Renaissance paintings and modern sculptures. This has attracted record crowds.

The critique focused on the installation's use of space, which was seen as problematic by some attendees.

Why the artist chose those colors being the subject of critical debate.

The Internet is where you have text and images.