# Clarity

Problems with clarity in writing can have several causes. Since each cause suggests a different solution, it’s helpful to know something about them as you revise. If you’re having trouble with clarity, diagnose the problem with these points in mind.

**Vague Pronoun Reference**: playing “hide the noun.” In writing, pronouns work only when the noun they’re replacing is nearby, reminding the reader of its presence. In speech, we may be used to using pronouns in vague ways because we have gestures and expressions to help us convey our ideas. For example, you might say, “There are bunnies in the backyard eating that,” while pointing to what *that* is. In writing, our audience doesn’t have the benefit of our gestures to help them interpret our meaning. Plus, as writers, we can’t immediately gauge whether we’ve confused our audience, which we do in a spoken conversation by picking up on nonverbal cues. Let’s take the bunny example further:

* There are bunnies in the backyard eating the lettuce. This isn’t good.

What isn’t good? That there are bunnies? That they’re eating the lettuce? That they’re eating the lettuce in the backyard, but it would be fine if they were in the front yard?

Here’s the same idea with a few nouns and a bit more context:

* There are bunnies in the backyard eating the lettuce. I was planning to make a salad with that lettuce, so it isn’t good that the bunnies are eating all of it.

While the second sentence may not be perfect, we have enough nouns and context to know who’s doing what.

**Writer-Based Prose**: stopping with a first or second draft that doesn’t consider audience carefully enough. It’s completely natural for writers to compose the first or even second draft mostly for themselves. First drafts, sometimes called zero drafts, can be a great way to just get the content on the page. In this first draft, it can be helpful for writers to write primarily for themselves since focusing too much on their audience can, at this stage, lead to writer’s block. After producing this first draft, many writers go back through their writing to clarify for themselves if what they’ve written is actually what they want to say. If the writer stops there, the prose may still be writer-centered. We recommend going back through the draft once again, this time with the audience in mind. Doing so can help writers flag whether particular word choices, jargon, and concepts need to be further explained so the draft’s content will be accessible to its target audience. Consider the following sentence:

* New users might prefer WYSIWYG editors, but experienced people can’t stand them.

People unfamiliar with the acronym will have a difficult time understanding the sentence. Consider the intended audience. Will the acronym be common knowledge to them? If not, make the content more accessible, such as in the following revision:

* New users might prefer graphical interface editors, but experienced people can’t stand them.

**Right-Branching Sentences**: the use of modifying words, phrases, and clauses after the main subject and action of a sentence. The English language is generally right-branching: sentences tend to start with the main parts (the subject and verb) before including extra information about those main parts by way of modifying words, phrases, or clauses. A right-branching sentence can be brief. Consider this sentence:

* They write well.

This sentence shows a right-branching structure at its most basic. The subject *they* leads the sentence, followed by the action *write*. Only after these core parts is the modifier *well* given to describe how they write.

Although a basic sentence like the one above is clear, right-branching sentences can be difficult for readers

when the modifying words, phrases, and clauses are more lengthy. Consider this sentence from Henry James’s novel *The Golden Bowl*:

* “He thought of these fellows, from whom he was so to differ, in English; he used, mentally, the English term to describe his difference, for, familiar with the tongue from his earliest years, so that no note of strangeness remained with him either for lip or for ear, he found it convenient, in life, for the greatest number of relations.”

The reader has to do a great deal of work to understand the relationship between the elements of the sentence. James’s right-branching sentence structure contributes to his reputation as a writer of difficult, though admired, prose. A text that has a lot of right-branching sentences is not necessarily bad, but it is challenging for a reader.

**Left-Branching Sentences**: the use of many modifying words, phrases, and clauses before the main subject and action of a sentence. Although the English language does tend to be more right-branching, it is also common for writers to delay the main subject and action of a sentence. A left-branching sentence can be brief. Consider this sentence:

* In an instant, everything changed.

This sentence shows a left-branching structure at its most basic. The sentence begins with a modifying phrase *in an instant* that tells when the core action *changed* occurred.

Although a basic sentence like the one above is clear, left-branching sentences can be difficult for readers

when the modifying words, phrases, and clauses are more lengthy. Consider this part of the first sentence from John Milton’s epic poem *Paradise Lost*:

* “Of man’s first disobedience and the fruit of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste brought death into the world and all our woe with loss of Eden, till one greater man restore us and regain the blissful seat, sing Heavenly Muse…”

This part of this first sentence of *Paradise Lost* spans over five poetic lines, delaying the main action until the word *sing* makes apparent that the previous phrases and clauses were detailing what Milton wants his muse to sing about. Such a delay of the main subject and action of a sentence can be confusing for readers, who are charged with retrospectively piecing together how the modifiers work with the main subject and verb.

**Mixed Metaphors**: the absurd result of combining two metaphor. If used well, metaphors can make complicated ideas easier to understand. But sometimes writers use two metaphors at once, which can confuse readers. This mixed metaphor complicates the sentence it’s meant to clarify:

* When you’re in the belly of the beast, try to turn obstacles into stepping stones.

This sentence combines two metaphors. The first compares a difficult situation to being inside a beast’s belly, but the next metaphor’s use of stepping stones makes the sentence absurd since stones are unlikely to be found in any belly. Check your writing for mixed metaphors so you may avoid producing such an unintended and ridiculous result.