

Awkward Sentences

Sometimes a sentence just doesn't sound right because it has a confusing and awkward structure. If you find yourself slowing down or stumbling over a certain sentence while reading aloud, you might need to rewrite the sentence and phrase it more clearly.

How to Fix Awkward Sentences

There is no single rule or technique to correct awkward phrasing. A writer must develop an "ear" for what sounds right and be willing to reword a sentence until it sounds smooth, clear, and direct. However, remember that writing is often overcomplicated. With this in mind, pretend to describe your writing subject to a close friend. Notice how much more clear it sounds when it is simplified. Say it out loud, then write it down. This is often a great fix for awkward sentences.

Awkward: Taking life a day at a time is how I think it should be done to be happy.

Better: Taking life one day at a time will make you happy.

Identifying the Main Noun and Verb

A more methodical approach to fix an awkward sentence is to identify the main noun (subject) and verb (action), then cut the sentence down accordingly. Ask yourself, "What is this sentence about—what is the core subject?" (Choose a noun.) Then ask, "What is this subject doing?" (Choose a verb.) Try to choose a strong verb that conveys action, not a "be" verb. (See "Improving Style" lesson).

Awkward: The fact that we don't eat a balanced diet is our biggest health problem and that we don't get enough exercise is also a big issue.

What is this sentence about? At first it seems it is about a bad diet, but then another important subject is tagged on the end—not enough exercise. So the sentence is about **poor diet and lack of exercise** (noun). What do these things do? We don't just want to say they "are" an issue. "Are" does not convey action and is a weak verb in this context. What do poor diet and lack of exercise do? They **contribute to** or **result in** or **cause** (possible verbs) our greatest health problems.

Better: Poor diet and lack of exercise contribute to our greatest health problems.

Here's another example.

Awkward: The article sums it up pretty well regarding what her plan is about.

What is this sentence about? **The article** (noun). What does the article do? (Notice the question doesn't ask for a weak verb—what the article "is.") It "**sums up**" her plan. Is there a better verb than "sums up"? What about **summarizes**? What else do articles do? They **present** information (possible verbs).

Better: The article summarizes her plan well.

Also: The article presents an effective summary of her plan.