

Avoiding Ambiguity

Are you looking to add clarity to your writing? If so, here are eight methods for correcting ambiguous expressions, as written by Norman Stageberg in *"Ambiguity in College Writing: To a College Freshman."*

Put simply, ambiguity means "multiple meaning." A word or passage that can be understood or interpreted in more than one way is ambiguous. For example: You see, many hands make light work.

Note: This sentence is ambiguous because of the words "light" and "work." It is unclear whether light is a noun or adjective, and whether work is a noun or verb. So, readers are left to wonder whether the "light is working," or the "work is light."

Stageberg's Eight Strategies:

1. **Synonymy:** Find a clear synonym to replace the ambiguous word.

The doctor made them well. ---> The doctor made them skillfully.

2. **Expansion:** Adding a word or two to the sentence can remove ambiguity.

He finished the race last Thursday. ---> He finished the race on last Thursday.

3. **Rearrangement:** Use the same elements in a different order. Rearrangement usually involves two nouns and an adjective. The sentence is ambiguous because the adjective could modify one or both of the nouns.

They are chewing tobacco and garlic.

or

They are chewing garlic and tobacco.

Since it's already known that chewing applies to tobacco, we are only uncertain as to whether the garlic is also chewable. So, by listing garlic first we identify that the "chewing" modifies both nouns. Otherwise, we can group the adjective, "chewing" with the noun "tobacco" after "garlic," to clarify that the garlic is not chewable:

They are eating garlic and chewing tobacco.

4. **Capitalization:** Capital letters are sometimes useful to make sentences clear.

You should call your uncle George. ---> You should call your Uncle George.

The first is ambiguous because it is unclear if the person calling the uncle is named George or if the uncle's name is George.

5. **Punctuation:** Commas, and other marks of punctuation, can be used to correct written ambiguity.

foreign study programs ---> foreign-study programs

In the above example, we encounter ambiguity as the result of successive modifiers. For an in-depth explanation, see the heading "Successive Modifiers" at the end of this handout.

- 6. Spelling:** Words that share the same spelling but different meaning in English are frequently the source for ambiguity in speech. However, spelling will rarely remove written ambiguity.

The governor went hunting bear last week.

- 7. Alternation of Context:** In clear writing, the context restricts meaning of words and structures. Therefore, ambiguity can be remedied by making the context sufficiently restrictive. Include specific details to narrow the possible meanings of the ambiguous statement.

Use of Grammatical Signals:

Gender Signals (his, her, its):

The puppy sat by the girl with the contented look ---> The puppy by the girl with (her/its) contented look

Person-thing Signals (who, which):

The dog of the neighbor that bothered him ---> The dog of the neighbor (who/which) bothered him

Number Signals (was-singular, were-plural):

One of the freshman girls who seemed downcast ---> One of the freshman girls who (was/were) downcast

Coordination Signals:

A car which stood behind the garage that was in need of paint ---> A car which stood behind the garage (and) which was in need of paint

Successive Modifiers:

When trying to avoid ambiguity in your writing, it is important to keep in mind that successive modifiers should always be considered an automatic danger signal. Successive modifiers are more than one adjective before a noun. The more modifiers (adjectives) you have before a noun, the more chance you have of ambiguity.

small business man (Is the business small, or the man?)

old car law (Is the law old, or the car?)

gray cat's eye (Is the cat gray, or the cat's eye?)