

# English Grammar and Style

## Revising medical writing

### Reasons not rules:

### Backtracking, pronoun-induced

### Part 2 – Single syntactic unit revision

#### Section Editors:

Wendy Kingdom  
info@wendykingdom.com

Alistair Reeves  
a.reeves@ascribe.de



#### Introduction

This is the second of a series of three articles on pronouns that cause distraction by making the reader backtrack. In this article, we examine a technique for eliminating backtracking by making a single change to the construction of the sentence. The technique is to eliminate the pronoun that is causing the distraction by shortening the clause with the pronoun into a pronoun-free phrase.

#### Example 1: 'This' in the subject position of the second independent clause in a compound sentence

The example, from an Introduction section, conveys a description of the research problem, consisting of tandem statements:

*In retina, spectrin is bound to retina epithelium, and **this** results in a different epithelial polarity.*

The problem for the reader is that it is not immediately clear what is the antecedent for 'this'. The answer is that 'this' refers to the first independent clause ('spectrin is bound to retina epithelium'). The backtracking caused by 'this' can be eliminated by transforming the second independent clause ('and this results in a different epithelial polarity') into a modifying adjectival participial phrase, 'resulting in,' which transforms the sentence from compound to simple. The suggested revision is:

*In retina, spectrin is bound to retina epithelium, **resulting** in a different epithelial polarity.*

Notes:

(a) It is appropriate to use the present tense of the present participle 'resulting' because the author is conveying known information in an Introduction section.

(b) In the example, the selection of 'this' over 'that' is determined by the context of the present tense in the first independent clause.

#### Example 2: 'That' in the subject position of the second independent clause in a compound sentence

This example, from a Discussion section, conveys the limitation and counterarguments of the experimental approach:

*For Staph aureus, there were discrepancies in the colony count, and **that** was possibly caused by shortened incubation times or contamination of the culture medium.*

The first clause conveys a limitation; the second, a counterargument. Both are expressed in the past tense, which is appropriate for the understatement of a past observation and an understated (i.e. circumspet) counterargument.

The backtracking caused by 'that' could be eliminated by replacing it with the slightly more specific 'that result'. But why not eliminate the pronoun altogether (as in Example 1, above)? For instance, the demonstrative pronoun in the second independent clause ('and that was possibly caused...') can be eliminated by transforming the clause into a past participial phrase. The suggested revision is:

*For Staph aureus, there were discrepancies in the colony count, **possibly caused** by shortened incubation times or contamination of the culture medium.*

Note: 'That' is used in the example because the time perspective in the first independent clause is the past.

#### Example 3: 'That' in the subject position of a contiguous sentence

This example, from the Material and Methods section, conveys a description of the method and objective:

*The neurologic test scores were analysed by Cluster Analysis. **That** enabled identification of subgroups within the sample of girls with AIS.*

To minimise backtracking, the second sentence beginning with ‘that’ can be transformed into an infinitive phrase, which conveys intent. The suggested revision is:

*The neurologic test scores were analysed by Cluster Analysis **to enable** identification of subgroups within the sample of girls with AIS.*

Note: the use of an infinitive phrase conveys the meaning without any backtracking; this revision is similar to the use of a participial phrase (Examples 1 and 2, above).

#### **Example 4: ‘That’ in the subject position of a contiguous sentence**

This example, from a Results section, conveys a verbal description of the data and preliminary interpretation:

*For the cross-situation, there was a 78% classification rate. **That** indicated a high degree of consistency for the classification scheme.*

There is no need to eliminate ‘that’ when its antecedent is clearly ‘78% classification rate’. However, preceding the demonstrative pronoun ‘that’ with ‘a rapidity’ – which enables commentary about the rate – not only eliminates the minor backtracking

but also conceptualises the gist of the preceding sentence.

*For the cross-situation, there was a 78% classification rate, **a rapidity that** indicated a high degree of consistency for the classification scheme.*

Notes:

- (a) In the revision, ‘that’ functions as a relative pronoun, modifying ‘rapidity’.
- (b) The addition of ‘rapidity’ and transformation from a demonstrative into relative pronoun represent a combination of a semantic and syntactic revision. ‘Rapidity’, a summative modifier, ensures antecedent certainty.

### **Summary**

Pronoun-induced backtracking can be eliminated by transforming: (1) the pronoun-containing clause into a pronoun-free present participial phrase, (2) the clause into a pronoun-free past participial phrase, (3) the clause into a pronoun-free infinitive phrase, or (4) the demonstrative pronoun-subject clause into a summative modifier followed by an adjective clause.

The third article on pronoun-induced backtracking will examine double-syntactic unit revision and syntactic position revision.

Michael Lewis Schneir  
Ostrow School of Dentistry of University of  
Southern California, Los Angeles, CA  
schneir@usc.edu