Good Writing Practice

Paragraph order distraction

Backtracking: pronoun, synonym

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Introduction

Backtracking distracts paragraph order by inducing re-reading previous text. Such backtracking is a more serious distraction when it occurs between sentences than within sentences, because the distance between a referent (pronoun or synonym) and its antecedent is longer inter-sentence than intra-sentence.

Pronoun-induced backtracking

The neutral personal pronoun (*it*), the indefinite pronoun (*both* and others), and demonstrative pronouns (*this*, *that*) – all of which are inherently inexplicit and common in research writing – necessitate referring back to an antecedent (i.e., a noun or previous textual information).

Part 1 – Personal pronoun-induced backtracking

Example: Introduction section, hypothesis justification

As described in case reports, root coverage is extensive by the Vestibular Incisor Subperiosteal Access (VISTA) technique. Furthermore, <u>it</u> provides evident biological advantages.

Revision (antecedent abbreviation)

*As described in case reports, root coverage is extensive by the Vestibular Incisor Subperiosteal Access (VISTA) technique. Furthermore, **VISTA** provides evident biological advantages.*

Notes

The antecedent for *it* could be root coverage or it could be the *VISTA* technique. Using the antecedent abbreviation *VISTA* clarifies the antecedent whilst avoiding repetition of *Vestibular Incisor Subperiosteal Access*.

Part 2 – Indefinite pronoun-induced backtracking

Example: Introduction section, objective + experimental approach

Therefore, this relation can be modelled in a robust fashion and presented to clarify the strength of the relation and to resolve residual uncertainties about the relation. Bayesian hierarchical modelling is suitable for <u>both purposes</u>.

Revision 1 (appositive restatement)

Therefore, this relation can be modelled in a robust fashion and presented to clarify the strength of the relation and to resolve residual uncertainties about the relation. Bayesian hierarchical modelling is suitable for both purposes: **clarification and resolution**.

Revision 2 (enumerated antecedent)

*Therefore, this relation can be modelled in a robust fashion and presented **(1)** to clarify the strength of the relation and **(2)** to resolve residual uncertainties about the relation. Bayesian hierarchical modelling is suitable for **both purposes**.*

Notes

The indefinite adjectival pronoun *both* in combination with a noun *purposes* elicits a backtracking comparable to the personal pronoun *it*. Although the antecedents to *both* are fathomable, minimising backtracking enhances immediate comprehension. In Revision 1, to avoid backtracking, the purposes (*to clarify … to resolve*) are each restated in a noun form: *clarification* and *resolution*. In Revision 2, numbering is useful to forecast and emphasise the antecedents thereby facilitating backtracking.

Part 3 – Demonstrative pronoun-induced backtracking

Example: Materials and Methods section, method

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

Revision (syntactic reduction + sentence combining)

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

Notes

In the Revision, the second sentence beginning with *that* is transformed (syntactic reduction) + translocation (sentence combining) into an infinitive phrase, which conveys intent.

Placement of the infinitive phrase after the verb is preferred, because placement in an initial sentence position suspends the long infinitive phrase overly delaying the subject and verb of the sentence. To some readers, the infinitive phrase may be thought to dangle, that is, be devoid of a modifier, such as *a neurologist*. However, the phrase can function adverbially modifying *were analysed*. A test for this adverbial function is transposition of the phrase to after the verb, a position not plausible if the phrase were strictly adjectival. Clearly, the infinitive phrase is not modifying the noun phrase *Cluster Analysis*.

Part 4 – Demonstrative pronoun-induced backtracking

Example: Results section, data-based observation + preliminary interpretation

As shown by the superimpositions, the observed movement frequency was the most for rotation and the least for bodily movement. <u>That</u> was likely due to the remaining band space at debond.

Revision (summative concept)

*As shown by the superimpositions, the observed movement frequency was the most for rotation and the least for bodily movement. That **frequency difference** was likely due to the remaining band space at debond.*

Notes

Replacement of *that* with *that frequency difference* eliminates any doubt about the antecedent of *that* and minimises backtracking to identify the antecedent.

That (not *this*) seems contextually dictated by the past tense of the predicate *was* in the first sentence.

Synonym-induced backtracking

In research writing, the repetition of a word (usually a noun) as a synonym is often a distraction, because no two words have exactly the same meaning. Contrary to the advice that synonyms engender interest, synonym usage (i.e., synonymy) may be interesting but at the expense of continuity – synonymy is inconsistent.

Synonymy also elicits backtracking to the synonym antecedent.

Part 1 – Patients ... participants

Example: Materials and Methods section, method

Post-stroke patients (n=361) with mild to moderate upper extremity impairment were enrolled in the Interdisciplinary Comprehensive Arm Rehabilitation Evaluation (ICARE), a randomised controlled trial of arm intervention. After the trial, the patient-reported outcome (the Stroke Impact Scale) was completed by the <u>participants</u>.

Revision (expanded noun antecedent)

*Post-stroke patients (n=361) with mild to moderate upper extremity impairment were enrolled in the Interdisciplinary Comprehensive Arm Rehabilitation Evaluation (ICARE), a randomised controlled trial of arm intervention. After the trial, the patient-reported outcome (the Stroke Impact Scale) was completed by the **enrolled patients**.*

Notes

Instead of using the synonym *participants*, clarity is achieved by repetition of the antecedent *patients* in an expanded form (*enrolled patients*).

Part 2 – Disks ... samples

Example: Materials and Methods section, materials

Composite disks (5.0 mm thickness × 14 mm diameter; Paradigm MZ100) were cemented to the blocks using dual-cure resin cement (RelyX Ultimate). <u>Samples</u> were polymerised (40 s), artificially aged (20,000 thermal cycles), sectioned (0.8 ± 0.2 mm), and tested for micro-tensile bond strength.

Revision (expanded antecedent)

*Composite disks (5.0 mm thickness x 14 mm diameter; Paradigm MZ100) were cemented to the blocks using dual-cure resin cement (RelyX Ultimate). **Cemented disks** were polymerised (40 s), artificially aged (20,000 thermal cycles), sectioned (0.8 ± 0.2 mm), and tested for micro-tensile bond strength.*

Notes

Switching from *disks* to *samples* generates uncertainty. In a sequence of effects on an entity, explicitly denoting the change in the entity to an expanded form (e.g., *disks* to *cemented disks*) facilitates clarity and tempers the monotony of repetition.

Part 3 – Limited ... limitation

Example: Discussion section, hypothesis-support limitation

However, these results may have been <u>limited</u> by the current CBCT resolution to accurately delineate the maxillary cancellous bone. Another <u>shortcoming</u> was that the retromolar bone remodelling was only tested in the non-growing adult sample.

Revision (verb nominalisation)

*However, these results may have been **limited** by the current CBCT resolution to accurately delineate the maxillary cancellous bone. Another **limitation** was that the retromolar bone remodelling was only tested in the non-growing adult sample.*

Notes

Usage of the noun *limitation* is an effective example of thematic word echo to the verb *limited*.

Summary

Overall, the backtracking induced by an inter-sentence pronoun or synonym can be revised by replacement with an explicit but not redundant form of the antecedent (e.g., abbreviated or modified). Another revision option is to emphasise (e.g., enumerate) the antecedent to facilitate the backtracking.

The revision options for inter-sentence backtracking are similar to those for intra-sentence backtracking. However, because of the increased antecedent-referent distance, the rhetorical distraction is more impeded immediate comprehension than dissonance. Synonymy is inconsistency.

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Questions or comments about distracting syntax will be responded to, possibly in a subsequent column.