

# English Grammar and Style

## Revising medical writing

### Reasons not rules:

### Backtracking, pronoun-induced

## Part 3 - Double syntactic unit revision and syntactic position revision

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### Introduction

This is the last of this series of three articles on pronouns that cause distraction by making the reader backtrack. In the first part of this article, we examine a technique for eliminating backtracking by making two changes to the construction of the sentence. The technique is to eliminate the pronoun that is causing the distraction by sentence syntax reduction.

### Example 1: 'It' in the subject position of the dependent clause in a complex sentence

The example, from an Introduction section, conveys a description of the research problem context, consisting of a descriptive and an assertive statement:

*Timely accurate screening and diagnosis is important because **it** can reduce the progression of the malignancy.*

The reader is led to backtrack because of the ambiguity whether 'it' refers to screening, diagnosis, or both. The question is whether the pronoun 'it' can be eliminated by syntactic reduction of both clauses. The answer is yes, because the independent clause is reduced into a noun phrase; the dependent clause reduced into a predicate.

The suggested revision is:

*Timely accurate screening and diagnosis **can** reduce the progression of the malignancy.*

#### Notes

- (a) In the example, 'it' refers to the pair 'screening and diagnosis' considered as a singular collective.

- (b) In the revision, 'is important' is unnecessary because of self-evidency.

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

This example, also from an Introduction section, conveys a description of the research problem context, consisting of a descriptive and assertive statement:

*Lysine is an abundant muscle constituent, and **it** decreases in amount during starvation.*

The reader backtracks because 'it' could refer to lysine, or to constituent. This 'it' can also be deleted by double syntax unit revision. The predicate of the first independent clause is transformed into the appositive 'an abundant muscle constituent', enabling elimination of the 'it' of the second clause, which is reduced to a verb phrase 'decreases in amount during starvation'. The suggested revision is:

*Lysine, **an abundant muscle constituent**, decreases in amount during starvation.*

#### Notes

- (a) In the revision, the appositive 'an abundant muscle constituent' is short enough to not interfere with the flow of the sentence.
- (b) In the example, the backtracking may be a cue that the compound sentence pattern is not matched to rhetorical intent. Additional cues to this mismatch are the following: (1) the first independent clause is descriptive and the second is assertive, (2) the verbs are non-parallel, namely, the linking verb 'is' and the intransitive verb 'decrease'.

A second technique for eliminating backtracking is by syntactic position revision. The technique is to

eliminate the pronoun that is causing the distraction by appropriate positioning of compared entities.

### Example 3: 'Those' in the prepositional phrase of an intra-sentence comparison

This example, from a Results section, describes a data-interrelative comparison:

*The absolute values for fracture toughness of primary teeth were similar to those for permanent teeth.*

The suggestion here is to avoid repeating 'values' in the form of 'those' by using a sentence-end compared entities pattern. By coordinating the noun phrases 'primary teeth' and 'permanent teeth' in an end-of-sentence comparison, the pronoun 'those' can be deleted. A further advantage is avoiding the repetition of 'teeth' in the coordinated pair.

*The absolute values for fracture toughness were similar between **primary and permanent** teeth.*

Note: Instead of the addition of explicit textual markers to avoid backtracking or pronoun elimination by clause-to-phrase reduction, a positional revision is applied.

### Summary

Pronoun-induced backtracking can be eliminated by (1) syntactically reducing both clauses or (2) repositioning the coordinated noun phrases.

In the next series of articles, we will examine techniques for eliminating backtracking induced by non-pronouns.

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