

Good Writing Practice

Non-contiguity: Adjective clause

Introduction

An adjective clause displaced from its modifiee by an intervening syntactic unit is a distraction. Another distraction is the vague adjective clause that seems to refer to an entire sentence rather than to a definite modifiee. Such vagueness has resulted in the pejorative term the “vague which”.

A modifiee is a syntactic unit modified by a modifier. It is not cited by even unabridged dictionaries but should be because of its succinctness. Further justification for its usage is by analogy to conventional pairs: employer.employee; mentor.mentee.

Experimental sections

Part 1 – Results section: Result (observation)

Example: adjective clause non-contiguity

The appliance resulted in the characteristic tooth movement for control groups, which consisted of three phases.

Revision 1

For **control groups**, the appliance resulted in the characteristic tooth movement, which consisted of three phases.

Revision 2

For control groups, the appliance resulted in the characteristic **three-phase** tooth movement.

Notes

The contiguity of *groups* and the plausibility of *which consisted of* as its modifier renders the distraction an impeded immediate comprehension. In Revision 1, not only does the transposition of *for control groups* enable contiguity of the adjective clause to its modifiee, but it also enables the transposed prepositional phrase *for control groups* to function as a sentence orientation.

In Revision 2, the adjective clause is syntactically reduced into the attributive compound adjective *three-phased*, the succinctness of which renders Revision 2 as a useful option. However, the complete adjective clause because of its length and sentence end-position placement is more emphatic than the compound adjective *three-phased*.

Part 2 – Results section: Result (sequential observations)

Example: adjective clause non-contiguity

Fluid was displaced into the joint cavity, which increased regional synovial fluid pressure.

Revision 1

Fluid was displaced into the joint cavity, a **displacement** that increased regional synovial fluid pressure.

Revision 2

Fluid was displaced into the joint cavity, **increasing** regional synovial fluid pressure.

Revision 3

Fluid was displaced into the joint cavity, and **regional synovial fluid pressure was increased**.

Revision 4

The **displacement** of fluid into the joint cavity **increased** regional synovial fluid pressure.

Notes

In the Example, the vague *which* seems to modify the entire preceding independent clause rather than one specific noun. The adjective clause could modify *fluid*, but only the fluid that was displaced into the joint cavity, not just fluid.

In Revision 1, the longest of the three revisions, the intended modifiee is emphasised by the usage of a noun derivative (*displacement*) of the verb *displaced*. Although *displacement* is an explicit modifiee of the adjective clause, the revision seems overly obvious (a hyper-correction), redundant, and usually not preferred to the Example.

In Revision 2, the participle *increasing* modifies the whole sentence as does the adjective clause in the Example, but without the backtracking of the relative pronoun *which*. One distraction of *increasing* is a disagreement in tense to a past observation, but its succinctness and fluidity outweigh its disadvantages and is consistently preferred to all the other revision options.

In Revision 3, the compound sentence befits the two observations but lacks the fluidity of Revision 2.

In Revision 4, the thematically focused after-

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the-fact subject *displacement* depends on a prior mention in the text and therefore more appropriate for the Discussion section; however, it does contain the appropriate past tense.

Contextual sections

Part 1 – Introduction section: Research problem – pertinent background

Example: adjective clause non-contiguity

There are several methods to estimate the CIR that are more efficient than those previously used.

Revision 1

To estimate the CIR, there are several methods that are more efficient than those previously used.

Revision 2

There are several **CIR-estimating** methods **that** are more efficient than those previously used.

Notes

It is not clear whether the adjective clause *that are more efficient than those previously used* modifies *CIR* or *methods*. Although the plurality of *that are* relates to the adjective clause to the modifiee *methods* and not to *CIR*, a reader may be uncertain whether the author committed a grammatical mistake of subject-verb disagreement in number.

Revision 1 involves transposing the displacing unit (infinitive phrase: *to estimate the CIR*) to the sentence-orientating position enabling the adjective clause to be contiguous to its modifiee *methods*.

Revision 2 involves syntactically reducing the intervening infinitive phrase into a compound-noun pre-modifier *CIR-estimating*, enabling contiguity of the adjective clause to its modifiee. The usage of this revision may depend on the prior mention of *CIR-estimating methods* because

it is an attenuated form of *methods to estimate CIR*.

Overall, the infinitive phrase displacement distraction (and its revisions) – similar to that for the prepositional phrase-caused displacement in Example 1 – is an example of an adjective clause modifying a specific modiffee.

Part 2 – Introduction section: Research problem – pertinent background

Example: adjective clause modifying a sentence

Some Alcyonarian soft corals release toxins into seawater, which affect community composition and function.

Revision 1

Some Alcyonarian soft corals release **into seawater** toxins, which affect community composition and function.

Revision 2

Some Alcyonarian soft corals release toxins into seawater, affecting community composition and function.

Revision 3

Some Alcyonarian soft corals release toxins into sea water and thereby affect community composition and function.

Revision 4

The **release** of toxins into sea water by some Alcyonarian soft corals affects community composition and function.

Notes

What is the modiffee of the *which* clause? As indicated by the plural verb *affect*, the modiffee can be the noun phrase *toxins* or *toxins into seawater* or the whole independent clause. This usage of the adjective clause is similar to that in Example 1 but *toxins* is a likely modiffee for the adjective clause, so the somewhat awkward transposition of *into seawater* enables contiguity of the adjective clause (Revision 1).

In Revision 2, syntactic reduction of the adjective clause to the participial phrase *affecting* may be a preferred option, because of its smooth flow, appropriate present tense for known information, and succinctness. Similar to the adjective clause, the participial phrase is probably modifying the displaced noun *toxins*.

In Revision 3, coordinating of independent clauses, the longest revision, explicitly coheres the two relations. In Revision 4, *release* as the subject of the sentence is stated after the fact, that is, occurring in a section of a journal article (the Discussion) after *Some Alcyonarian soft corals release toxins into seawater* was stated in a prior

section (the Results).

Summary

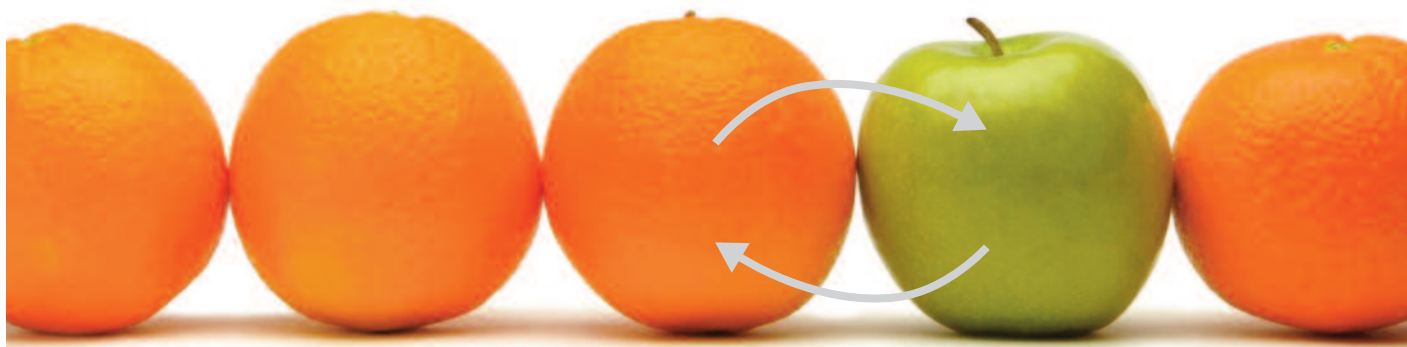
The four examples are equally distributed between Experimental (Results) and Contextual sections (Introduction) of a journal article, indicating a lack of section specificity.

A modifier displaced from its modiffee is distracting by impeding immediate comprehension. In contrast, a modifier of a whole sentence because of its conventionality is just a dissonance. For an adjective clause modifying a specific modiffee, revision involves eliminating the distance between modifier and modiffee by transposing the intervening syntactic unit to the sentence-initial position or transposing a pre-modifier form of the modifier so that modifier and modiffee are contiguous.

For an adjective clause modifying an entire sentence (the vague *which*), the adjective clause can be reduced into a participial phrase or expanded into a coordinate independent clause. Each of the revisions expresses a different nuance.

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Schematised distractions and preferred revisions

Transposition of a disruptive prepositional phrase

The appliance resulted in the characteristic tooth movement for control groups, which consisted of three phases.

→ **For control groups**, the appliance resulted in the characteristic tooth movement, which consisted of three phases.

Transposition of a pre-modifier form of an adjective clause

There are several methods to estimate the CIR that are more efficient than those previously used.

→ There are several **CIR-estimating** methods that are more efficient than those previously used.

Syntactic reduction to a participial phrase

Fluid was displaced into the joint cavity, which increased regional synovial fluid pressure.

→ Fluid was displaced into the joint cavity, **increasing** regional synovial fluid pressure.

Some Alcyonarian soft corals release toxins into sea water, which effect community composition and function.

→ Some Alcyonarian soft corals release toxins into seawater, **affecting** community composition and function.