

Good Writing Practice

Syntactic order

Adverb misplacement



Introduction

Adverb placement is complicated by the variety and abundance of syntactic units that are modifiable by an adverb, ranging from words to phrases to sentences. The most likely such modified units are verbs (and verbals), adjectives (and adjectivals), and other adverbs (adverbials). Another complication is the inherent mobility of adverbs within a sentence.

In this article, examples of adverb placement are arranged in order of the number of possible positions within sentences. The reasons guiding such placement are (1) specificity (selecting the exact syntactic unit modified by the adverb) and (2) emphasis (selecting the syntactic unit to be emphasised).

Part 1 – Specificity

The following example and revision show that an infinitive phrase (a verbal) is the most specific modified unit by an adverb.

Example 1: Two possible adverb positions

Halothane was substituted for ether lightly to anaesthetise rats used in this study.

Revision

*Halothane was substituted for ether **to lightly** anaesthetise rats used in this study.*

Notes

In the example, logic determines that the verb phrase *was substituted* could **not** be the modified unit because *was lightly substituted* is illogical. In contrast, *lightly to anaesthetise* is logical, but the back-modification (or squinting modification) of *for ether lightly* is possible. Consequently, to avoid mismodification, in the Revision, the adverb *lightly* is placed between the infinitive marker *to* and the infinitive *anaesthetise*, thereby exclusively modifying the infinitive phrase.

Grammatical folklore has stigmatised the splitting of an infinitive. Should you abide by this

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rule? Avoiding a split infinitive can result in the modification of an unintended modified unit. In the Example, the word *lightly* seems to simultaneously back-modify *for ether* and premodify *to anaesthetise*: The meaning *substituted for ether lightly* is unintended.

Splitting the infinitive is actually a misnomer, because the infinitive is the base form of the verb (i.e., *anaesthetise*). The word *to* is the marker of the infinitive. Therefore, the split is actually between the marker and the infinitive or splitting an infinitive phrase.

Another consideration is that *lightly*, a manner adverb, is more mobility-limited than a degree adverb and a time adverb. As evidence, *lightly* could not be a front- or end-of-sentence modifier (see Part 2).

Part 2 – Emphasis vs. Specificity

A classic example of emphasis over specificity is *I **only** have eyes for you* rather than the more specific *I have eyes only for you*.

Example 1: Three possible adverb positions

Treatment of HT-4 cells with various tocopherol analogues protected cells completely against glutamate-induced cytotoxicity.

Revision 1

*Treatment of HT-4 cells with various tocopherol analogues **completely** protected cells against glutamate-induced cytotoxicity.*

Revision 2

*Treatment of HT-4 cells with various tocopherol analogues protected cells against glutamate-induced cytotoxicity **completely**.*

Notes

This Example shows that even though the adverb is placed before the specific syntactic unit *against glutamate-induced cytotoxicity*, placement before the main verb *protected* may be preferred. That is,

selection of the sentence position for the adverb *completely* may be more a function of intended emphasis of the verb rather than modification of the most specific syntactic unit. Another perspective is to consider the verb *protected* plus the following prepositional phrase as the syntactic unit for adverb modification.

Revision 2 emphasises the modifier *completely* by its position at the end of the sentence, and by comma-segregation. In contrast, *completely* would be illogical as a front-of-sentence modifier, possibly because *completely*, a degree adverb, must be in close proximity to its modified unit *protected against glutamate-induced cytotoxicity*.

Example 2: Four possible adverb positions

*All large-scale testing methods were capable of simulating **successfully** the earthquake response.*

Revision 1

*All large-scale testing methods were **successfully** capable of simulating the earthquake response.*

Revision 2

*All large-scale testing methods were capable of **successfully** simulating the earthquake response.*

Revision 3

*All large-scale testing methods were capable of simulating the earthquake response, **successfully**.*

Notes

This Example exemplifies that the adverb usually precedes (Revision 2) rather than follows the modified syntactic unit *stimulating*, thereby splitting the preposition-verb phrase analogously to splitting the infinitive phrase. Although *stimulating* is a gerund (i.e., a present participle functioning as a nominal object of the preposition *of*), adverbial modification is appropriate because the verb-like structure classifies the gerund *stimulating* as a verbal.

The Example also exemplifies that adverb placement before the linking verb *were* as in *successfully were capable* is an unconventional pattern but placement before the adjective *capable* is possible (Revision 1). It thus appears that if the main verb is a linking verb, then instead of adverb placement before the main verb placement before the most specific syntactic unit is preferred.

In Revision 3, an end-of-sentence placement of the adverb is logical, whereas adverb placement at the front of the sentence would be illogical – probably because of the distance from the modified unit *stimulating* and the movement

limitations of an adverb of manner. Again, the end-of-sentence position and comma-caused segregation emphasise the adverb.

Example 3: Six possible adverb positions

*A variety of techniques **recently** have been developed in this new discipline.*

Revision 1

*A variety of techniques have **recently** been developed in this new discipline.*

Revision 2

*A variety of techniques have been **recently** developed in this new discipline.*

Revision 3

*A variety of techniques have been developed **recently** in this new discipline.*

Revision 4

*A variety of techniques have been developed in this new discipline, **recently**.*

Revision 5

***Recently**, a variety of techniques have been developed in this new discipline.*

Notes

This example shows that auxiliary verbs (*have, been*) before the main verb (*developed*) complicate adverb placement. However, the adverb can simply be placed before the main verb as shown in Revision 2. The meaning expressed seems to be the same as that in the Example and Revision 1. One reason for the lack of any overt difference may be the flexibility of the adverb of time *recently*. This flexibility for modification is evident by placement of *recently* at the end of the sentence (Revision 4) and at the beginning of the sentence (Revision 5). Placement at the front-of-sentence or end-of-sentence position may depend on the requirements of paragraphing, that is, how the sentence relates to continuous sentences. In Revision 3, placement after *developed* is also possible.

Summary

It would be a simple process if an adverb were placed before the most specific syntactic unit. However, selection is also based on emphasis, e.g., before the main verb of a predicate. Furthermore, the range of placement possibilities increases depending on the type of adverb: manner, negation, degree, time.

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The black ta

My first EMWA conference in spring 2016 seemed to have just finished, and I was already on my way to Brussels, the heart of Europe, for my second conference.

The first day started with getting a badge with a black lanyard, which to me symbolises a rising career in medical writing and makes me feel at home. It was pleasing to see familiar faces from my first conference and to get to know new members – those who, with excitement and uncertainty, wear their bright new green tags. I could hear and feel the excitement and anticipation. Entering the workshops, we all settled down, allowing our workshop leaders to change the paradigms I built during my years in academia.

After learning many key lessons during the first day, I finished with an inspiring lecture by Dr Robert Colebunders and an introduction to Belgian beer, chocolate, and history by Rita Wellens. For first-time attendees, it might have seemed surreal to be talking to so many highly experienced professionals at the networking reception, but that quickly subsided once we realised that everyone was in the same place, talking the same language, and for the same



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reason: we are passionate about medical writing. For me, however, it was still unreal to be discussing with Phil Leventhal and Beatrix Dörr the possibility of participating in the editorial board of *Medical Writing* or, eventually, becoming a member of EMWA's executive committee only a few months after having become a volunteer of the Social Media Team.

I started my second day with the early morning session "Show IT, share IT, rise and shine" during which, as a member of the Social Media Team, I was invited to share my Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn experience as applied to medical writing. Even though I was exhausted after a day full of workshops, training, and networking, in the afternoon, I attended the Freelance Business Forum, where Marco Torregrossa inspired us with his overview on freelancing in Europe. The following discussions were enriching not only for new but also for experienced freelancers.



Before the Freelance Business Forum was even finished, we were all inspired to take advantage of the evening's social activities. The "Chocolate and beer tour" led not only to new friendships but also to new ideas. Experienced and prospective medical writers were chatting and sharing their experiences, producing an

endless world of possibilities. As for myself, perhaps catalysed by beer, Jackie Johnson and I came up with an idea for a new workshop, which quickly became part of the upcoming Internship Forum.

After the delicious Belgian beer, waking up the

following day was not so easy. While many attendees enjoyed the easy morning yoga session with Slavka Baronikova, I was still fighting with my pillow and my morning coffee. Soon, it was time for my last workshop of the conference. A surprisingly full room received Julia Donnelly. Time flew while we tried to develop our first publication plan. To my surprise, after the conference was finished, many attendees were still actively networking and already putting into action some fresh ideas. I could feel that no one was looking forward to leaving the conference.

From my experience, attending EMWA conferences offers an endless world of possibilities. Now that the autumn conference is over, I am already excited for the next one and looking forward to seeing familiar faces and making new friends.

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