



# In the Service of *Good Writing*

## Editorialize with Sentence Adverbs

By Laurie Endicott Thomas, MA, ELS

**S**entence adverbs are a smooth and somewhat sneaky way to inject your opinions into your writing. Editors and readers who can recognize sentence adverbs are thus better equipped to sort fact from opinion.

To understand how sentence adverbs work, you need to understand the difference between an *adjunct* and a *disjunct*. In general, an adjunct is something added to another thing but not structurally part of it. In grammar, an adjunct is an adverb or adverbial phrase that is attached to a verb, especially to express a relation of time, place, frequency, degree, or manner. In contrast, a disjunct is an adverb or adverbial phrase that is loosely connected to a clause or sentence and conveys the speaker's or writer's comment on its content, truth, or manner. In short, an adjunct modifies a particular verb, whereas a disjunct provides commentary about a clause or sentence.

- ☹ Suddenly, it began to rain. (*Suddenly* is an adjunct modifying the main verb, *began*.)
- ☺ Fortunately, it began to rain. (*Fortunately* is a disjunct expressing the writer's opinion about the change in the weather.)

If you know how to use sentence adverbs, you can omit a lot of needless words. Often, a clumsy expletive construction can be collapsed into a single sentence adverb:

- ☹ I feel that it is unfortunate that potato chips are fattening.
- ☺ Unfortunately, potato chips are fattening.

As the table shows, sentence adverbs can help you express many kinds of opinions:

It is obvious (to me) that...	Obviously, ...
The evidence suggests (to me) that...	Evidently, ...
It would be ideal (for me) if...	Ideally, ...
It is surprising (to me) that...	Surprisingly, ...
I am certain that...	Certainly, ...
I am thankful that...	Thankfully, ...
It seems curious (to me) that...	Curiously, ...
I am hopeful that...	Hopefully, ...

The sentence adverb is much more concise than the construction that it replaced. However, the loss of the personal pronoun may obscure the fact that the sentence adverb is expressing the writer's or speaker's opinion.

Some people object to the use of the word *hopefully* as a sentence adverb, presumably because they think that *hopefully* is dangling. A *dangling modifier* is a modifier, such as a participial phrase, that is intended to modify something that was left out of the sentence. In the following example, the subject of the present participle *walking* is missing from the sentence. Notice that I can fix the dangling participial phrase by supplying the participle's subject plus an auxiliary verb:

- ☹ While walking to school today, my book fell into the mud.
- ☺ While I was walking to school today, my book fell into the mud.

When *hopefully* is being used as a sentence adverb, it does not dangle. It is not modifying something that is missing from the sentence. Instead, it expresses the writer or speaker's feelings about what the sentence is saying. Curiously, the people who object to the use of *hopefully* as a sentence adverb don't seem to object to the use of any other sentence adverbs, such as *obviously*, *curiously*, *evidently*, and *thankfully*.

Some people feel that it is better to say "one hopes that" instead of using *hopefully* as a sentence adverb. But when *hopefully* is used as a sentence adverb, it really means "I hope that," not "one hopes that." If you are going to express your opinions, you might as well take ownership of them.

As far as word order and punctuation go, sentence adverbs and adjunctive adverbs get the same treatment. In the following examples, *obviously* is a sentence adverb because it expresses the writer's opinion. *Quickly* is an adjunctive adverb because it modifies the verb in a way that expresses timing. Either one should be set off with a comma if it appears at the beginning of a clause or sentence:

- ☹ Obviously, he has spent all of his money.
- ☺ Quickly, he spent all of his money.

Neither would be set off with a comma if it appears in the middle of a sentence.

- ☺ He has obviously spent all of his money.
- ☺ He quickly spent all of his money.

Although a sentence adverb modifies the clause or sentence as a whole, it follows the same rules for word order as an adjunct that modifies the main verb. You can put an adjunct between the auxiliary and the stem of the verb it modifies. You can also put a disjunct between the auxiliary and the stem of the main verb in the clause or sentence.

Some adverbs can serve as adjuncts or disjuncts, depending on the context:

- ☺ It is better to travel hopefully than to arrive. (Here, *hopefully* is an adjunct expressing the feelings of the traveler)
- ☺ Hopefully, they will arrive before nightfall. (Here, *hopefully* is a disjunct expressing the feelings of the speaker or writer.)

When you use sentence adverbs in your own writing, keep in mind that they express your personal opinions, which might not be widely shared. When you use words like *evidently*, *certainly*, or *obviously*, you are saying that the evidence impresses you, that you are certain, or that some fact or conclusion is obvious to you. When you use words like *fortunately* or *ideally*, you are expressing your feeling that something is fortunate or would be ideal, from your perspective. Of course, what seems obvious to you might not be obvious to other people. It might not even be true. Something that would represent good fortune for you might be unfortunate for someone else.

Laurie Endicott Thomas is the author of *Not Trivial: How Studying the Traditional Liberal Arts Can Set You Free*.

Author contact: [Lthomas521@verizon.net](mailto:Lthomas521@verizon.net)

## Microsoft Word 2010 for Medical and Technical Writers

Peter G. Aitken PhD and Maxine M. Okazaki PhD

*Written by medical writers,  
for medical writers*

Learn how to use Word for long,  
complex documents

The 2nd edition of this popular book is now  
available, completely updated to cover  
Microsoft Word 2010

Learn best practices and avoid pitfalls with  
Word options, styles, templates, tables of  
contents, headers and footers, tables,  
automatic numbering, and more

The book is available in a print edition as well  
as several e-publishing formats. Please visit  
[www.tech-word.com](http://www.tech-word.com) for more information

## Elsevier ClinicalKey™

A smarter search for faster answers  
to all your medical questions



2013  
SIIA CODiE  
Award finalist  
"Best Semantic  
Technology  
Solution"

## The world's first Clinical Insight Engine

### Comprehensive Content:

Only ClinicalKey delivers all of Elsevier's medical and surgical content in one dynamic, integrated resource, providing access to over 1000 books, 500 journals, thousands of videos, millions of images and more.

### Trusted Answers:

All of the content comes backed by Elsevier, the world's leading provider of health and science information, so you get the most current, accurate and trustworthy answers with just one search.

### Unrivaled Speed to Answer:

With Smart Content built on Elsevier's proprietary taxonomy, you get faster, more clinically relevant answers with every search, for less time looking and more time getting your job done.

**AMWA Member Savings!**  
Save 20% off any one-year  
ClinicalKey subscription!

To subscribe, visit: <http://store.clinicalkey.com>  
Enter coupon code: AMWA20