



# In the Service of *Good Writing*

## Don't Lead Readers Down the Garden Path!

By Laurie Thomas, MA, ELS

To lead someone “down the garden path” means to mislead them. A garden path sentence is a grammatically correct sentence that initially lures people into an incorrect interpretation. Here’s a classic example, from Steven Pinker’s *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*:<sup>1</sup>

- ☹ The horse raced past the barn fell.

The first three words in the sentence lead you down the garden path. They make you think that *raced* is the main verb in the sentence. Then, when you see “fell” at the end of the sentence, you realize that your initial interpretation of the sentence makes no sense. You have to go back to the beginning of the sentence and reinterpret the whole thing. Only then do you realize that the sentence means the following:

- ☺ The horse that was raced past the barn fell.

By definition, a garden path sentence is grammatically correct. However, it still qualifies as bad writing because it annoys the reader. People don’t like being led down the garden path, and they don’t like having to backtrack to figure out what the writer really meant.

### Causes of the Garden Path Effect

Garden path sentences are a common problem in written English because English is an analytic language and therefore relies heavily on word order to establish what role each word plays within the sentence. It’s far more difficult to find examples of garden path sentences in a highly inflected language such as Latin, which uses word endings to indicate parts of speech, case, and so on.

Garden path sentences are a far more common problem in written English than in spoken English because English speakers use prosody (ie, rhythm, intonation, or stress) to clarify meaning. These clues are lost when a sentence is written down.

Although a garden path sentence is grammatically correct, it is still badly written. Careful attention to some simple grammatical principles can help you avoid sending your readers down the garden path.

### Reduced Relative Clauses

The garden path effect often results from the use of a reduced relative clause. In an overzealous attempt to “omit needless words,” many people end up omitting relative pronouns: the *wh* words (*which*, *who*, etc.) or *that*. Using a reduced relative clause will shorten the sentence but may nevertheless end up wasting readers’ time by leading them down the garden path.

- ☹ The cotton clothing is made of is grown in Mississippi.
- ☺ The cotton that clothing is made of is grown in Mississippi.
- ☹ Fat people eat accumulates.
- ☺ The fat that people eat accumulates.

### Careless Punctuation

If your house style permits, use close punctuation, which means using all of the punctuation that the grammatical structure of the material suggests. Some people kvetch that all those extra commas make the writing seem “choppy,” but close punctuation sometimes prevents the garden path effect:

- ☹ I kissed Joan and Mary laughed.
- ☺ I kissed Joan, and Mary laughed.

## GRAMMAR REVIEW

**Clause**—the smallest grammatical unit that can express a complete proposition (ie, it contains a subject and a predicate).

**Subordinate clause**—Also called a dependent clause, a subordinate clause cannot stand on its own as a sentence. Instead, it modifies an independent clause or serves as a component of it.

**Independent clause**—a clause that can stand on its own as a sentence.

**Relative clause**—a subordinate clause that modifies a noun or noun phrase. In English, a relative clause is usually introduced by a relative pronoun: *who*, *whom*, *whose*, *whoever*, *whosoever*, *whomever*, *which*, *what*, *whatever*, or *that*.

**Reduced relative clause**—a relative clause that is not marked by an overt complementizer, such as *that* or *who*. In English, relative pronouns are used as complementizers; dropping them can lead to the garden path effect because it becomes difficult to parse the sentence until you have finished reading it.

### Words That Straddle Word Classes

Garden path sentences are common in English because English words can serve as different parts of speech without being marked as such. Adjectives can serve as nouns, nouns can become verbs, and verbs can become nouns.

- ☹ The man who hunts ducks out on weekends.
- ☺ The hunter ducks out on weekends.
- ☹ The old man the boat.
- ☺ The elderly people man the boat.

To detect this kind of garden path sentence before it gets published, watch out for adjectives that are being used as nouns and verbs that look like nouns.

### Block Off the Garden Path

When viewed as a whole, a garden path sentence is grammatically correct. However, readers do not view sentences as a whole. They read them one word or phrase at a time. For that reason, garden path sentences should be corrected so that readers will be led in the direction where the writer really wants them to go.

It's easy to find garden path sentences in someone else's work. They make you stop in confusion and then backtrack to figure out what the writer really meant. It's harder to find garden path sentences in your own writing because you know what you meant!

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### Reference

1. Pinker S. *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*. New York: HarperCollins; 1995.

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