



In the Service
of Good
Writing

The Peasants Are Revolting!

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If the king exclaims, “The peasants are revolting!” is he expressing his contempt for the peasantry, or is he alarmed that they are rising up against him? The king’s exclamation could convey either meaning. Thus, it is ambiguous. The English word *ambiguous* comes from a Latin word that originally meant to drive in both directions and is often used to describe a word or sentence that can be interpreted in two or more ways. The word *ambiguous* can also be used to convey that something is doubtful or uncertain, especially because it is obscure or indistinct.

Poets often use ambiguity deliberately, for poetic effect. Comedians often use it for comedic effect. In contrast, medical communicators must avoid ambiguity. Medical communicators do not want to confuse or mislead their readers.

Ambiguity in a sentence can result from two different kinds of problem. **Semantic ambiguity** results from a word having more than one possible meaning. In contrast, **syntactical ambiguity** results from a problem in the structure of the sentence. The ambiguity in the king’s exclamation results from a combination of the two. The verb *revolt* means to renounce allegiance or subjection. If *are revolting* represents the present progressive form of *to revolt*, it would mean that the peasants are currently rising up against their oppressors. However, the word *revolting* can also be used as an adjective that means extremely offensive or distasteful. The meaning that you derive from the king’s exclamation would thus result from how you parse the exclamation—how you break the sentence down into its parts of speech. Should you interpret *are revolting* as the present progressive form of *to revolt* or as a linking verb (*are*) and an adjective that serves as a predicate complement?

By itself, the statement does not give you enough information to decide which meaning of revolting was meant. To clear up the confusion, you have to rely on information from

outside the sentence. In other words, you have to rely on the statement’s context. The word *context* came from the Latin word *contextus*, which in turn came from a word meaning weaving together. Thus, *context* can refer to the parts of a discourse that surround a word or statement. It can also refer to the environment or setting in which something happens.

If you are present when the king says, “The peasants are revolting!” his facial expression and tone of voice would probably clear up the ambiguity. Is his nose wrinkling in disgust, or are his eyes wide with fear? Facial expressions, tone of voice, and prosody (rhythm and intonation) are lost when a sentence is written down. The loss of this contextual information means that writers must be particularly careful to avoid writing sentences that could be misconstrued.

In good technical writing, the meaning of each sentence is clear and unambiguous. Ideally, the meaning of each sentence should be immediately obvious. The reader should not have to waste time and energy in puzzling out the meaning of ambiguous sentences from their context.

Semantic ambiguity is a common problem in medical writing. For example, the word *nursing* could refer to the duties of a nurse but it could also mean breastfeeding. The *AMA Manual of Style* specifies that the word *nursing* should be used only to refer to the duties of a nurse. Words such as *breastfeeding* or *lactation* should be used to refer to breastfeeding.¹

An even more common word that can be ambiguous is *since*. *Since* originally meant *after*, but it could also be used to imply a cause-and-effect relationship. One way to avoid confusion is to use the word *since* only to indicate timing. If you mean to express a causal relationship, you should write *because* instead. Of course, if you slavishly replace all instances of *since* with *because*, your writing could sound as if you are off to see the wizard: because, because, because,

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because! I occasionally use *since* to mean because, but only if the tense and aspect of the verbs in the sentence make it clear that *since* means because:

- ☺ Since I am the only person who has not been drinking, I'll be the designated driver.

English is particularly prone to syntactical ambiguity because it is relatively uninflected. For example, we don't change the endings on a noun to indicate whether the noun is the subject of a verb, or the direct or indirect object of a verb, or the object of a preposition. To avoid syntactical ambiguity, we have to pay careful attention to word order and the use of prepositions. The following sentence would not be ambiguous if it were in Latin, which declines nouns for case.

- ☹ John is closer to his mother than his father.

Because of the lack of inflection, we cannot tell which relationships the writer intends to compare. To clear up the ambiguity, you have to add either a verb or a preposition, depending on which meaning is meant. If you are editing someone else's work, you will have to ask the author which meaning is correct:

- ☺ John is closer to his mother than his father **is**.
- ☺ John is closer to his mother than **to** his father.

There are three things that you can do to reduce the ambiguity in your writing: (1) study your dictionary; (2) study the *AMA Manual of Style*, particularly the section on correct and preferred usage; and (3) learn how to diagram sentences. Studying your dictionary will alert you to words that have more than one meaning. The AMA style manual will alert you to many ambiguous words and syntactical problems, especially those that occur frequently in medical writing. Learning how to diagram sentences will help you identify many syntactical problems that affect the meaning of your sentences.

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References

1. *AMA Manual of Style: A Guide for Authors and Editors*. 10th ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press Inc; 2007.

Calendar of Meetings

American Medical Writers Association
October 8–11, 2014
Memphis, TN

Association of Health Care Journalists
March 27–30, 2014
Denver, CO
<http://healthjournalism.org/hj14>

American Pharmacists Association
March 28–31, 2014
Orlando, FL
www.aphameeting.org

American Society for Indexing
May 1–2, 2014
Charleston, SC
www.asindexing.org/category/conference/

Council of Science Editors
May 2–5, 2014
San Antonio, TX
www.councilscienceeditors.org

European Medical Writers Association
May 13–17, 2014
Budapest, Hungary
www.emwa.org

Society for Technical Communication
May 18–21, 2014
Phoenix, AZ
<http://summit.stc.org>

Society of Scholarly Publishing
May 28–30, 2014
Boston, MA
www.sspnet.org

Canadian Science Writers Association
June 5–8, 2014
Toronto, Ontario
<http://sciencewriters.ca/>

AMWA Regional Conferences

Delaware Valley Chapter
April 26, 2014
Princeton, NJ
www.amwa-dvc.org

Pacific Coast Chapter
April 27–30, 2014
Pacific Grove, CA
www.amwa-pacsw.org

Carolinas Chapter
May 2, 2014
Chapel Hill, NC
www.amwacarolinas.org/wp/spring-conference

Rocky Mountain Chapter
May 3, 2014
Moab, UT
www.amwa-rmc.org

Michigan Chapter
May 9, 2014
Ann Arbor, MI
www.amwa-mi.org

Indiana/Ohio Valley Chapters
June 6–7, 2014
Indianapolis, IN
www.hoosieramwa.org