

Writing Clear Sentences Avoiding Ambiguous *This*

A pronoun (for example, he she, him, they) substitutes for its noun antecedent noun (a noun is a word that identifies a person, place, object, or idea). The antecedent comes before the pronoun in the same or a preceding sentence. Here is an example:

Where is my book? It is on the chair.

In the sentence above, the pronoun **it** refers to the word **book** for its meaning—**book** is the antecedent of **it**: In other words, **it** refers back to **book** so we know what it means.

When a writer uses a singular pronoun to refer back to a whole clause or sentence rather than to a singular noun antecedent in that clause or sentence, the relationship is unclear—the meaning is ambiguous, so the sentence is not precise. The problem occurs frequently in sentences with the pronoun **this**.

Greg often cannot remember the combination for his locker. When this occurs, he has to call his brother for help.

In the sentence above, to what one word does **this** refer? The problem is that **this** does not refer to a single word, a singular noun, but to the whole action in the preceding sentence: “often cannot remember the combination for his locker.”

There are several ways to make this relationship between statements clear, or unambiguous. Some of these strategies are described below.

Strategy 1

One way to clarify the meaning of the example sentence is to insert a word after **this**, one that summarizes “often cannot remember the combination for his locker.”

Greg often cannot remember the combination for his locker. When this problem occurs, he has to call his brother for help.

The word **problem** summarizes the action of the previous sentence, so the word **this** no longer refers back to the action in the preceding sentence.

Strategy 2

When **this** does not have a singular noun antecedent in the previous sentence, you can combine two sentences. In the following example, delete **you could** and change the verb into its gerund form. (A gerund is the ing form of a verb used as a

noun.) Then combine the sentences to eliminate the ambiguous **this** in the second sentence.

Original: You could deposit nuclear waste in outer space. This would be one way to solve a difficult dilemma.

Revision: Depositing nuclear waste in outer space would be one way to solve a difficult dilemma.

Strategy 3

Here is another strategy for combining sentences to avoid an ambiguous connection between *this* and a sentence without an antecedent. You can use an infinitive phrase (an infinitive is the form *to + verb*). In the following example, combine the sentences by deleting *some people* and *this* and then changing *blame* to its infinitive form, *to blame*.

Original: Some people blame all social problems on moral decay. This is a gross oversimplification.

Revision: To blame all social problems on moral decay is a gross oversimplification.

The revision eliminates the vague relationship between **this** and the previous sentence.

Strategy 4

One more way to combine sentences to avoid ambiguous **this** is to change one sentence into a **that** clause. In the following example, insert **that** before **Janette**, delete **this**, and combine the two sentences.

Original: Janette was late for her class. This disturbed her instructor.

Revision: That Janette was late for her class disturbed her instructor.

Exercise A

Revise the following sentences to avoid ambiguous this. For these sentences you will either:

- a. Insert a word after *this* that summarizes the previous sentence,

- b. Change the verb in the first sentence to a gerund (*ing* form of the verb) and combine the two sentences, deleting *this*,
- c. Change the verb in the first sentence to an infinitive (to + the verb), delete *this* and combine the two sentences, or
- d. Change one sentence into a *that* clause and combine the two sentences.

A1. Use a Summarizing Word

1. The children screamed and shouted. This bothered the neighbors.

2. The climate is changing because of air pollution. This is recognized by scientists.

A2. Use a Gerund (the *ing* form of the verb)

1. They replaced the Carib Indians with indentured servants. This was the work of settlers.

2. She examines laboratory specimens. This will be part of Melissa's major.

3. People should keep a computer free of dust. This will help prevent crashes.

4. They fixed the generator of the Honda. This enabled the car to start.

A3. Use an Infinitive

1. You plan a good time for New Year's Eve. This is natural for young singles.

2. Julia watches soap operas. This is very entertaining to her.

3. Rufino studies music. This is his ambition.

4. Vanessa wants to play professional basketball. This is her goal.

A4. Use a That Clause

1. Asteroids may collide with the Earth. This interests scientists.

2. Students responded positively to the charity drive. This pleased everyone.

3. Comets fly by the Earth at 100,000 mph. This impressed the students.

4. Rents are getting more expensive. This is hard to accept.

Exercise B

Revise one of your essays so that it does not have ambiguous *this*. Try to use all of the strategies described in this lesson.