

Shifts

Shifts are sudden changes within a sentence that make the sentence confusing or illogical. There are four different types of shifts.

Person and number

The point of view is the perspective from which a piece of writing is written. There are three categories of point of view, and each one can be singular or plural: first person (I, we), second person (you), and third person (she, he, it, they). Avoid shifting unnecessarily from one point of view to the next, or changing the number.

If a student doesn't keep up with the reading, you'll have a difficult time passing the class.

This sentence switches from the third person singular to the second person singular.

A student should bring their book to class.

"Student" is singular, but "their" is plural. There is a shift in number in this sentence.

Tense

Verb tenses establish the time of the actions in a piece of writing. Unnecessary changes in verb tense confuse the reader.

The war raged on for years, but eventually a truce is declared.

This sentence shifts from the past to the present tense.

When writing about literature or common facts, the convention is to use the present tense.

The bones that make up the fingers are known as the phalanges.

In Hamlet, the main character accidentally kills his lover's father.

Mood and Voice

Besides tense, verbs also tell mood and voice. There are three moods in English. The *indicative* is the most common, and is used for facts, opinions, and questions: *I did my homework*. The *imperative* is used for commands and advice: *Do your homework!* Lastly, the *subjunctive* is used for wishes or things contrary to fact: *If had more time, I would have done my homework*. Switching unnecessarily between moods creates confusion.

The police officer told me to replace my broken headlight. Also, use my turn signal when making a turn.

These sentences shift from the indicative to the imperative mood.

A verb can also be one of two voices: *active* and *passive*. With an active verb, the subject of the sentence is performing the action: *Bozo read the book*. With the passive, the subject of the sentence is receiving the action: *The book was read*. In general, prefer active verbs. In either case, be consistent with which voice you are choosing to use.

I had to finish my essay. My math homework also had to be completed.

The first sentence is active; the second one is passive. A shift in voice moves the focus from the actor to the object (or vice versa). Such changes can be distracting.

Direct/indirect statements and questions

An indirect statement or question is reporting about what someone said or asked: *He asked me to show him my driver's license*. A direct statement or question states it directly: *Can you show me your driver's license?* Sudden shifts from indirect to direct statements or questions are awkward.

I wonder if they got home safely, and did they get to sleep that night?

The first part is indirect, while the second part is direct.

Shifts Exercise

name:

Edit the following sentences to eliminate distracting shifts.

- a. A courtroom lawyer has more than a touch of theater in their blood.

 - b. The interviewer asked if we had brought our proof of birth and citizenship and did we bring our passports.

 - c. The reconnaissance scout often has to make fast decisions and use sophisticated equipment to keep their team from detection.

 - d. After the animators finish their scenes, the production designer arranges the clips according to the storyboard. Synchronization notes must also be made for the sound editor and the composer.

 - e. Madame Defarge is a sinister figure in Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*. On a symbolic level, she represents fate; like the Greek Fates, she knitted the fabric of individual destiny.
1. Everyone should protect yourself from the sun, especially on the first day of extensive exposure.

 2. Our neighbors told us that the island was being evacuated because of the coming storm. Also, take the northern route to the mainland.

 3. Rescue workers put water on her face and lifted her head gently onto a pillow. Finally, she opens her eyes.

 4. In my first tai chi class, the sensei asked if I had ever done yoga stretches and did I have good balance.

 5. The artist has often been seen as a threat to society, especially when they refuse to conform to conventional standards of taste.