

Clarity

SUU Writing Center

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To express yourself clearly, choose words and phrases carefully. The following are common mistakes that writers often make and some strategies that you can use to achieve clarity in your writing.

Is when/ Is where

The phrases <i>is when</i> and <i>is where</i> should be avoided.	WRONG: A dirty house <i>is where</i> people fail to clean their home regularly. RIGHT: People <i>who fail to clean regularly</i> have to live with dirt. (Replace the verb “is” with an action verb.)
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Should of/ Should have

Writers often misuse <i>should have</i> , <i>would have</i> , and <i>could have</i> because the <i>have</i> sounds like <i>of</i> when used in a contraction (should’ve).	WRONG: I <i>should of</i> returned my library books last Tuesday. RIGHT: I <i>should have</i> returned my library books last Tuesday.
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Double Negatives

Two negative words—no, none, neither, barely, hardly, or scarcely—should not be used together to express a negative thought in the same sentence.	WRONG: The patient <i>did not feel nothing</i> . RIGHT: The patient <i>felt nothing</i> . The patient <i>did not feel anything</i> .
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Dangling Modifiers¹

Any phrases or clauses that serve as adjectives should be placed directly after the noun that they modify. If the modifier is misplaced, the meaning could be misunderstood.	WRONG: <i>Hanging in the closet</i> , Wesley found his coat. (What was hanging in the closet, Wesley or his coat?) RIGHT: Wesley found his coat <i>hanging in the closet</i> .
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Improper preposition use and pronoun agreement can lead to ambiguity and lack of clarity; these topics are covered in the Prepositional Phrase tipsheet and the Pronoun tipsheet, respectively. As for clarity, the most important rule is to write so that your target audience will have no doubts about what you are trying to say. While revising, pay attention to the places that sound unclear. Consider asking other people to read and critique your paper to help you spot confusing passages.²

¹ For further information on adjectival clauses and phrases, see the tipsheets on clauses and prepositional phrases.

² You pay writing assistants in the Writing Center with your program fees. If you need someone to read your paper with you, make an appointment with one of them!

