

Eliminating distracting shifts

Make the point of view consistent in person and number.

The point of view of a piece of writing is the perspective from which it is written: first person (*I* or *we*), second person (*you*), or third person (*he*, *she*, *it*, *one*, or *they*).

Writers who are having difficulty settling on an appropriate point of view sometimes shift confusingly from one to another. The solution is to choose a suitable perspective and then stay with it.

- ▶ One week our class met in a junkyard to practice rescuing a victim trapped in a wrecked car. We learned to dismantle the car with the essential tools. ^{We} You were graded on ^{our} your speed and ^{our} your skill in extricating the victim.

The writer should have stayed with the *we* point of view. *You* is inappropriate because the writer is not addressing readers directly. *You* should not be used in a vague sense meaning “anyone.”

- ▶ ^{Police officers are} A police officer is often criticized for always being there when they aren’t needed and never being there when they are.

Although the writer might have changed *they* to *he* or *she* (to match the singular *officer*), the revision in the plural is more concise.

Maintain consistent verb tenses.

Consistent verb tenses clearly establish the time of the actions being described. When a passage begins in one tense and then shifts without warning and for no reason to another, readers are distracted and confused.

- ▶ There was no way I could fight the current and win. Just as I was losing hope, a stranger ^{jumped} jumps off a passing boat and ^{swam} swims toward me.

Writers often encounter difficulty with verb tenses when writing about literature. Because fictional events occur outside the time frames of real life, the past and the present tenses may seem equally appropriate. The literary convention, however, is to describe fictional events consistently in the present tense.

- ▶ The scarlet letter is a punishment sternly placed upon Hester’s breast by the community, and yet it ^{is} was an extremely fanciful and imaginative product of Hester’s own needlework.

(continued)

Make verbs consistent in mood and voice.

Unnecessary shifts in the mood of a verb can be as distracting as needless shifts in tense. There are three moods in English: the *indicative*, used for facts, opinions, and questions; the *imperative*, used for orders or advice; and the *subjunctive*, used in certain contexts to express wishes or conditions contrary to fact.

The following passage shifts confusingly from the indicative to the imperative mood.

- ▶ The officers advised us against allowing anyone into our homes without proper identification. ^{They also suggested that we} ~~Also,~~ alert neighbors to our vacation schedules.

Since the writer's purpose was to report the officers' advice, the revision puts both sentences in the indicative.

A verb may be in either the active voice (with the subject doing the action) or the passive voice (with the subject receiving the action). If a writer shifts without warning from one to the other, readers may be left wondering why.

- ▶ When the tickets are ready, the travel agent notifies the client, ^{lists each ticket} ~~Each ticket is then listed~~ on a daily register form, and ^{files} ~~a copy of the itinerary. is filed.~~

The passage began in the active voice (*agent notifies*) and then switched to the passive (*ticket is listed, copy is filed*). Because the active voice is clearer and more direct, the writer changed all the verbs to the active voice.

Avoid sudden shifts from indirect to direct questions or quotations.

An indirect question reports a question without asking it: *We asked whether we could visit Mimo.* A direct question asks directly: *Can we visit Mimo?* Sudden shifts from indirect to direct questions are awkward. In addition, sentences containing such shifts are impossible to punctuate because indirect questions must end with a period and direct questions must end with a question mark.

- ▶ I wonder whether Karla knew of the theft and, if so, ~~did she report~~ ^{whether she reported} it to the police?

The revision poses both questions indirectly. The writer could also ask both questions directly: *Did Karla know of the theft and, if so, did she report it to the police?*

An indirect quotation reports someone's words without quoting word for word: *Annabelle said that she is a Virgo.* A direct quotation presents the exact words of a speaker or writer, set off with quotation marks: *Annabelle said, "I am a Virgo."* Unannounced shifts from indirect to direct quotations are distracting and confusing, especially when the writer fails to insert the necessary quotation marks, as in the following example.

- ▶ Mother said that she would be late for dinner and ~~please do not~~ ^{asked me not to} leave for choir practice until Dad ^{came} ~~comes~~ home.

The revision reports all of the mother's words. The writer could also quote directly: *Mother said, "I will be late for dinner. Please do not leave for choir practice until Dad comes home."*