

Confusing sentence problems are listed under “faulty predication” in some handbooks, but I’ve never found that term terribly helpful. It really isn’t just the predication that is faulty. The entire sentence lacks a certain logic. It’s as if the writer transferred his or her thoughts quickly to the paper and then forgot to revise. Consider the following sentence.

Confusing: The purpose of the program allows a student to solve a quadratic equation interactively.

We understand what the writer is trying to say, but the sentence is confusing. Why?

1. “The purpose” of anything never simply “allows.”

Revision 1: The purpose of the program **is to allow** a student to solve a quadratic equation interactively.

This revision is correct, but it is wordy.

2. Who (or what) does the action in the sentence? In other words, who (or what) is the **agent**?

Revision 2: The program allows a student to solve a quadratic equation interactively.

If we make “The program” the doer of the action, then a program certainly “allows” a student to solve a quadratic equation. Better yet,

Revision 3: The program solves a quadratic equation interactively.

In Revision 3, the agent is the grammatical subject, and what the agent does (solves) follows as the main verb of the sentence.

3. If we make “a student” the agent, then we have a sentence like Revision 4.

Revision 4: A student solves a quadratic equation interactively by using the program.

How Do You Rewrite Confusing Sentences to Make them Clearer?

There really are no firm “rules” to correct confusing sentences (or sentences with faulty predication). The best we can do is think and follow some general guidelines to improve their readability.

1. Determine who the “main character” in the sentence is. The “main character” is usually the person who does the action. Sometimes we call this “person (or thing) who does the action” the agent. Start the sentence with the person who does the action. In other words, start the sentence with the agent.
2. Determine what the agent is doing. What the agent is doing is usually stated as the main verb. Look for verbs that actually say something, strong verbs, rather than the verb “to be.”
3. If there are embedded clauses within the sentences, do the same with those clauses.

Confusing: The reason for Smith’s firing is because he lied in his employment application.

Revision 1: Smith was fired because he lied in his employment application.

Revision 2: The reason for Smith’s firing is his lying in his employment application.

Exercises: Each sentence below is confusing, wordy, or garbled. Please rewrite each sentence for clarity.

1. After finally applying the prescribed medication for a few days, is when Michael started feeling better.

2. Sometimes because of our jobs it prevents us from spending more time with the whole family and is the reason that normally we all get together on holidays.

3. Now that the little boy lied to his aunt makes him believe that there is no Jesus.

4. In my opinion of the Aesop fable is that I don't think the old gardener was playing a trick on his sons, however, it was a lesson that the old gardener wanted to teach his sons about the orchard.

5. By telling them of a treasure will be found in the garden was a perfect way to have his sons involve in the garden, for his the old gardener didn't have much time to live.

6. First reason why I treasure my watch is because my sister bought it for me before she left for the army.

7. When I was about 6, I watched my mom stare at her miniature spoon collection before she walked out the door forever. I thought why would she do that.

8. By running for student council was the reason why Roderick improved his popularity.
