

# Common Problems in Communication

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## Problems in Communication

### Common problems in writing and speaking

### 1. Sentence-level

#### 1.1 Separate into two sentences ideas which are not closely related.

Don't put two major points in one sentence. One sentence should have one major point, and other ideas should be in the sentence only if they are closely related to (for example, if they support) that major point.

Just as Choi absorbed the culture of old Europe, my husband and I are absorbing the culture of old Korea, and we find ourselves surrounded by Koreans wherever we go, including a large number of families with children of all ages. (From *Korea Herald*, In my view.) *The underlined clause is not related closely enough to the major point of the sentence.*

#### 1.2 Put the main point first.

For the reader's ease in understanding, put the topic first. Which sentence below is easier to understand? (Both sentences are worded badly, but one is still more clear than the other.)

It is on the content and educational curricula and nature of the training received that the prospects of first-time job seekers and their mid-career retraining possibilities depend.

The prospects of first-time job seekers and their mid-career retraining possibilities depend on the content and educational curricula and nature of the training they receive.

The second sentence is easier to understand, because the main subject and verb are presented first. If minor details are presented before the main subject, the reader will have difficulty remembering the details long enough to relate them to the main point when he finally comes to the main point.

#### 1.3 Parallelism

Which sentence is better?

Ku-bong is both an artist and he spends time at athletics.

Ku-bong is both an artist and an athlete.

The second one is better, because it has parallelism; the words and phrases are similar grammatically.

#### 1.4 Make sure your sentence says what you want it to say.

In the sentence "I am against using Hangul together with Chinese characters," the writer actually wanted to say he was against using Chinese characters, not that he didn't want to use both together.

How about these sentences?

A fossil is an extinct animal. The older it is, the more extinct it is.

Heredity means that if your grandfather didn't have any children, then your father probably wouldn't have any, and neither would you, probably.

Only the policeman could kill the people by strangling them without screaming.

#### 1.5 Avoid run-ons

Run-on sentences are the result of punctuation problems or absence of a conjunction. Can you fix this sentence?

The air is filled with the sound of birds the grass is a beautiful shade of green.

#### 1.6 Make the subject and verb a logical match.

The telephone pole was approaching fast. I was attempting to swerve out of its way when I struck my front end. (*Anguished English*)

*My front end?* He means *my car's* front end.

#### 1.7 Too many ideas in one sentence

This is related to "Separate into two sentences ideas which are not closely related," above.

I was the only survivor of a sightseeing bus accident which a communist of North Korea made to disorder our society and I could survive the accident because of a pack of cigarettes. (From homework.)

This long sentence is difficult to understand because it has too many ideas in it (and because there is not a clear main idea and relevant minor idea). How about trying it this way? The communist is not relevant to the person's survival of the accident.

A communist of North Korea tried to cause an accident of a sightseeing bus. I was the only survivor of this accident, saved by a pack of cigarettes.

## 2. Modifiers

## English 3

### 2.1 Order your clauses to accurately reflect the relationship between their ideas.

Put the clause which you want to emphasize at the beginning.

Question: Are the workers' suggestions ever accepted?

✗ They are accepted even though they are small things, when they make sense.

\ They are accepted when they make sense, even though they are small things.

(*When they make sense* is more important than *small things*.)

Question: How fast was the blue car going when it hit the white Ford?

✗ When the blue car hit the white Ford it was going 30.

\ The blue car was going 30 when it hit the white Ford.

(The question is "how fast," not "when.")

### 2.2 Misplaced adverbial and prepositional phrases

Put the modifying phrase as close as possible to the element that it is intended to modify. Here are a few examples of this very common problem:

- Other places where we have found families and school groups include the Folk Museum at Andong and Hahoe, the folk village just outside of Andong. (From *The Korea Herald*, In My View.) *Are Andong and Hahoe both outside of Andong?*
- My daughter bought a video player at a department store of Samsung brand and with, of course, the usual service guarantee. (From *The Korea Times*.) *Is the department store made or owned by Samsung?*
- Judge, to the jury: Now, as we begin, I must ask you to banish all present information and prejudice from your minds, if you have any. (*Anguished English*) *It seems that the judge is questioning whether they have minds, but he is actually referring to information and prejudice.*
- Park was found murdered by police in his home. (From *The Korea Times*.) *The police murdered Park?*
- I saw you were arrested by the police on MBC News last night. (From homework.) *Arrested on MBC News?*
- The most crazying thing to him is to see the students who are playing truant from school and playing football, during hours of teaching through the window. (From homework.) *How does someone teach through a window?*
- They have been insisting that the policeman should be fired and sentenced to death for an hour or more. (From homework.) *An hour or more is quite a short death.*

### 2.3 Dangling modifiers

Put the modifying phrase as close as possible to the element that it is intended to modify. A couple examples:

- Once purchased, consumers fall into the position of subservient captives. (From *The Korea Times*.) *Are consumers purchased?*
- Locked in a vault for 50 years, the owner of the jewels has decided to sell them. (From *Anguished English*.) *Was the owner locked in the vault?*

### 2.4 Clauses: Restrictive (without comma) Vs Non-restrictive (with comma):

He says the Clinton administration supports Iraqi exiles, who want to overthrow Saddam. (From AP, *The Korea Times*.)

The comma leads the reader to believe that all Iraqi exiles want to overthrow Saddam. If you **don't** use the comma it will mean that Clinton supports only those exiles who want to overthrow Saddam, not all Iraqi exiles. See "Relative Clauses," on our Web site.

### 2.5 Multi-word adjectives can be misleading:

The exploding juice maker market at home will lead more companies to eye the overseas market next year. (From *The Korea Times*.) *The reader might think that these juice makers explode.*

### 3. Transitions

#### 3.1 Provide a transition when it is needed to show the relation or lack of relation between sentences.

- Zanzibar is noted for its monkeys. The British governor lives there. (From *Anguished English*.) A transition is needed to show that the writer is not insultingly relating the governor with monkeys.

#### 3.2 Because...

Do not begin a one-clause sentence with *Because*. Putting *because* at the beginning of a one-clause sentence turns the sentence into an incomplete sentence.

I hit him. REASON: He bothered me.

- ✗ I hit him. Because he bothered me.
- \ I hit him because he bothered me.
- \ I hit him. I did this because he bothered me.
- \ Because he bothered me, I hit him.

### 4. Unclear pronoun reference

#### 4.1 Put the noun *before* its pronoun.

- There are so many differences between them that their parents can hardly understand today's kids.

*Parents* and *today's kids* should come before *them*, and *today's kids* should come before *their*. But even that wouldn't make a really clear sentence. Rather: There are so many differences between today's kids and their parents that the parents can hardly understand their kids.

#### 4.2 Who does the pronoun refer to?

- The death of Francis Macomber was a turning point in his life. (From *Anguished English*.)
- After Governor Baldwin watched the lion perform, he was taken to Main Street and fed 25 pounds of raw meat in front of Cross Keys Theater. (From *Anguished English*.)

See "it vs. this"

### 5. Punctuation

#### 5.1 Placement of punctuation marks

Don't put punctuation marks at the beginning of a line.

- ✗ He told me to go there  
, but I decided not to.
- \ He told me to go there,  
but I decided not to.

#### 5.2 Hyphens

- Put the hyphen at the end of the line, not at the beginning.
- Don't separate one-syllable words (✗ the-ir, th-en)
- Don't hyphenate when there are only two letters left (✗ abrupt-ly, corrupt-ed)

### 6. Grammar

#### 6.1 Use the passive only when it is useful

Don't use passive in English for every word that is usually used in the passive voice in Korea (e.g., *saraji* → was disappeared). English seems to prefer the active voice except when there is a *special* reason to use the passive voice.

- ✗ The ratio of the nation's general high schools to vocational high schools for girls has been declined to 6:4 from 7:3 over the past few years. (*The Korea Herald*)

Instead of the offensive "You should do this," we can say, "This should be done." Korean avoids the offensive by dropping the subject.

Use the passive construction when the subject is unknown or when it is not as important as the verb.

## 7. Words and phrases

### 7.1 Be conscious of every word

It is bad manners to break your bread and roll in your soup. (From *Anguished English*.) *The reader can see the writer rolling in his soup.*

To be a good nurse, you must be absolutely sterile. (A *sterile* nurse cannot have babies.)

## 8. Sexist language

### 8.1 Pronouns (possessive, object and subject)

A few years ago people started paying attention to the resentment which many women feel towards the use of *he* and *him* as pronouns for general use, and now we are trying to avoid this usage.

Because this is a relatively new concern, even native speakers sometimes find it difficult to avoid being sexist. These days many writers use a plural pronoun to refer to a singular noun, but just as many other writers (including this writer) think this is an incorrect and lazy solution.

Here are some methods for avoiding sexist language. Usually, not all will work for one situation. You might have to recast the sentence to allow use of the method.

1. Use the passive voice so that you don't have to use a subject for the verb.  
If a student reads the book carefully he will understand its main points.  
If the book is read carefully its main points will be understood.  
A student learns a language well only if the student involves himself or herself actively in learning.  
A student learns a language well only if the student become involved actively in learning.
2. Use the plural form of the referent noun so that you can use the plural form of pronouns.  
If the author intends to use survey to support his claim, he might be selective in targeting.  
If some authors intend to use a survey to support their claims, they might be selective in targeting.
3. Repeat the referent noun (when another noun comes between the first and second mention of the referent).  
When a student asks the teacher to give less homework, it means that the student doesn't have enough time.
4. Use 'one' as a pronoun. (If 'one' is used more than once, it may sound pretentious; vary 'one' with 'a person' and other synonyms, as in 5 below.)  
When one asks the teacher to give less homework, it means that that person doesn't have enough time.
5. Use a synonym for the referent noun instead of a pronoun.  
If a person doesn't give money to a beggar we might think this miser is very cruel.
6. Recast the sentence or the paragraph.  
If the reader has some knowledge about Korea's socio-economic situation in the 30 and 40s, he will better understand...  
With some knowledge about Korea's socio-economic situation in the 30s and 40s, the reader will better understand...

### 8.2 *Man* instead of *people*

Use the word *people* when you mean more than one person. *Man* is used only when speaking of *all humans in general*, or *mankind*.

## 9. Mr. MacStein's Bugaboos: common errors gathered over years of homework correction

### by the way

Because of the English-Korean dictionary, this is often mistakenly used as the wrong meaning of *kurundae*: "however" or "but." It only means "That reminds me..." or "I just thought of something I want to tell you."

### in my college/high school days

Say "In college..." or use a clause instead ("When I was in college...").

### ✗ In my freshman, I...

Say "In my freshman year..."

## ✗ In the first grade of college/high school...

In the first year of college/high school.

## **much Vs a lot of**

We usually use *much* in formal writing, and *a lot of* in speech.

## ✗ go the army

Go to/into the army, or join the army. Get out of the army.

## ✗ She told me like this

(This is probably caused by interference from Korean.) Instead, “She told me that...” or “She told me this: ‘...’”

## ✗ his words

Instead, “what he said.”

## could

We use *could* when we want to emphasize “was able to.”

- ✗ Last Saturday I could feel a strange pain in my stomach. ( I felt
- ✗ After careful examination, the doctor could know that I had appendicitis. ( the doctor felt

## discuss/say about sth

Both *discuss* and *say* are followed directly by an object, then a preposition if there is another object.

- Let’s discuss what the author meant to say.
- Say something about that, please.

## **common sense vs. common knowledge; common sense vs. general knowledge**

If you are referring to information which everyone knows, say common knowledge; if you mean the way people *use* information, it’s common sense.

- It’s common knowledge that a pan gets very hot when it’s on the burner a long time.
- It’s common sense that you shouldn’t touch a pan that’s been on the burner a long time.

General knowledge is the knowledge which is tested on employment exams.

- I have to read the economic dailies because there are lots of general knowledge questions on the Hyundai exam.

## phrases which imply sweeping generalization

(“it is natural that” “everyone knows that” “it is common sense that”). Don’t use these unless you are *sure* that you can use them legitimately.

## by vs. for

If you do something without the help or accompaniment of someone else, use *by*. Some idiomatic expressions (like “I cook for myself”) use *for*, but it is safest to consider these as exceptions to the rule.

- ✗ I learned it for myself.
- ✗ I am not going to go to the doctor; I’m going to defeat this cold for myself.

## by vs. with

*By* is followed commonly by the agent or causative agency: <a wall built *by* the Romans> <destroyed *by* fire>. *With* is often followed by the name of the instrument which accompanies the action: <write *with* a pen> <defend oneself *with* a stick>. It may, however, take for its object something not consciously used as an instrument but serving as the instrumentality by which an effect is produced: <he amused the crowd *with* his anecdotes> <do not kill us *with* kindness>. (From *Webster’s New Dictionary of Synonyms*, available in Korea.)

## which vs. who vs. that

Rule 1: *Who* refers to people, *that* refers to people and/or things, *which* refers to things.

Rule 2: Generally, use *which* to start a nonrestrictive clause and *that* and *who* to start a restrictive clause. (See “Restrictive (without comma) Vs Non-restrictive (with comma)”) )

## it vs. this

- ✗ ... It means...
- ( ... This means...

## English 3

### **...etc. and ...and so on**

Be careful of how you use *etc.*, or *and so on*. Too often they are used in a way that makes these terms meaningless. Instead, express clearly what these terms refer to.

- ✘ I bought apples, pears, bananas, etc.
- \ I bought apples, pears, bananas, and a few other fruits.

Here are some more examples of how you can replace *etc.* and *and so on*:

- ...and other such people who watch television too much.
- ...and more ideas as silly as this.

If you can't think of words to use instead of *etc.* or *and so on*, this probably means that the idea isn't clear to you. Either clarify the idea to yourself or don't say anything at all.

### **And... and But...**

Generally, avoid beginning sentences with *And* and *But*. Using *And* or *But* to begin a sentence sometimes results in using it in several sentences consecutively, or too often.

Here are some expressions you can use instead.

for *And*:

*In addition, ...; Another reason for this opinion is that ...; Besides...; Moreover...  
...also...*

for *But*:

*However, ... or ..., however, ...; Although he said this...; In spite of this...*

### **dates**

In American English, write the date as it is said: August 1, 1993 or 8/1/93. When speaking, remember the definite article and ordinal form: *The 24th*.

### **✘ understand my mind**

- ✘ I want you to understand my mind.
- ✘ I know your mind.
- \ Please try to understand what I'm thinking.
- \ I know what you're thinking.

### **✘ lose my weight, looking for his job**

Don't use a possessive pronoun in front of the noun when you are talking about something that's not definite or specific. If you say, "I want to lose my weight," you will disappear completely if you get your wish. "Looking for his job" means that he has misplaced the job which he already had and is now trying to find it again. Instead, say "I want to lose (some) weight," and "looking for a job."

### **✘ as possible as**

- ✘ I will study as possible as I can.
- \ I will study as hard/much as possible.
- \ I will study as hard/much as I can.

### **be willing to vs. want to**

A person is willing to do something when that something is not something he wants to do *but* will do if it is necessary. A person wants to do something when that something is really desired.

### **like to vs. want to**

You *like to do* something in general, and you *want to do* a specific thing. For example, you may generally like to go swimming but not want to go swimming today because it's too cold.

### **even though..., but...**

Don't use both of these in the same sentence. *Even though* includes the meaning of *but*.

### **even if vs. even though**

We use *even if* when the condition is not certain\*, and *even though* when the condition is certain. In the first sentence below, it is not certain that the student will pass the test.

- ✘ Even though you pass the test you will not pass the course.
- Even if you pass the test...



(\**Even though* is not used when the condition is not certain, but *even if* is used colloquially both when the condition is certain and when it is uncertain.)

### **find vs. look for**

We *look for* something in order to *find* it. *Look for* is the means, and *find* is the successful result.

### **look at vs. watch vs. see**

We are able to *see* (receive the visual image) something if we *look at* (direct our visual attention to) it. If we look at something with continued attention, we *watch* it.

### **hear vs. listen to**

We are able to *hear* (receive the aural signal) something if we *listen to* (direct our aural attention to) it.

### **incident vs. accident**

An *incident* is usually an event which is caused by someone's intention. There is no intention in an *accident*—in fact, *accident* means without intention.

### **should and must and have to**

If we use *should* or *must* in the wrong way or too often, we will sound arrogant and offensive. We can avoid this by restructuring the sentence. (See "Getting People to Change.")

- ✗ Unwanted pregnancies should be avoided through sex education.
- \ We can avoid unwanted pregnancies through sex education.
- ✗ You should not smoke so much.
- \ If you didn't smoke so much you would feel better.
- \ It worries me to see you smoke so much.

### **should VS have to**

Don't confuse *have to*, which expresses an absolute sense of requirement, with *should*, which expresses the attitude that something is desired, or expected, or that one thing is better than another.

- ✗ Mr. Macstein, do we have to hand this in tomorrow?
- \ Mr. Macstein, should we hand this in tomorrow?
- ✗ The city must make laws to prevent pollution.
- \ The city should make laws to prevent pollution.

Use *have to* only if you want to emphasize that something is absolutely necessary or unavoidable.

- Well, I have to go now. I've got a test tomorrow.
- You won't? But you have to!

### **Most of students**

Use *of* when the noun is preceded by an article, an objective pronoun or a possessive pronoun. Otherwise, don't use *of*.

- \ Most of *my* friends... (possessive pronoun)
- \ Most of *them*... (objective pronoun)
- \ Most of *the* friends... (article)
- ✗ Most of friends...

### **✗ were died, were dead**

Simple past tense means that the situation no longer exists. The following homework sentence, therefore, implies that the man and woman who *were dead* are alive now.

- There is a large crowd and a man and a woman were dead. *Were dead* \ *died*

### **during vs. for**

*During* is used to say when (a specified period of time) something happened; *for* is used to say how long it happened. (Swan, 171)

- X During several months I was very depressed.
- O For several months I was very depressed.
- O During those several months I was depressed. (*Those* specifies the period.)
- O During that time I was depressed. (*That time* is a specific period.)

## **10. Miscellaneous additional**

## English 3

### **10.1 chronological clarity in a narrative**

Here are some rules to remember when you write a narrative (a story).

1. Don't confuse the reader by jumping back and forth between past, present and future; plan the story so that events generally flow from past to present to future.
2. Make sure that the times of events are logical, and that the time of each event is consistent with all other events in the story.
3. Use the appropriate tense.
4. Use appropriate chronological coherence devices.