

Clarity of Prose: Suggestions for Working on Error Patterns

1. **Verbs:** Circle all the verbs on the first couple of pages of your paper. After you have done this, look at the verbs and ask yourself what verb tense or tenses you are using in your paper. If you switch verb tenses at points in your paper, does the switch make sense? Does your reader have a clear sense of the time at which the actions in your paper are taking place? For example, can your reader tell when something happened in the past or when you are using the present tense to talk about something that happens all the time or that is happening now?

If you are using more complex verb tenses, like “had been walking” or “will have been eating,” make sure that all of the words in your verb phrases make sense and are consistent throughout your paper. If you are confused about these more difficult verb forms, look in a grammar handbook or your ACT manual or visit the website <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/> for more information on verb tenses and other grammar issues.

2. **Subject-Verb Agreement or Singular/Plural Nouns:** Circle all of your verbs and underline the nouns in each sentence. Read the first couple paragraphs of your paper carefully, stopping to make sure that your subjects agree with the verbs used.

If you are using present tense verbs, try using the following rule:

| | Noun | Verb |
|--------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Singular subject: | The girl_ | sing S . |
| Plural subject: | The girl S | sing_. |

Also ask yourself whether the other nouns in your sentence are supposed to represent ONE person, place, or thing or MORE THAN ONE person, place, or thing.

3. **Sentence Structure:** As you read over your paper, stop at any sentences that are hard to read out loud or to understand. If a sentence seems confusing, try to create a simple sentence, or two simple sentences, with only a subject, verb, and object. Once you have one or two simple sentences, then you can think about how and where you might want to add information to your sentence or how you might combine two simple sentences with words like “and,” “however,” or “furthermore.”
4. **Word Form:** If a word or a group of words you are using seem(s) confusing, think about whether you might be using the wrong part of speech or form of the word. If you have written a sentence like, “I want to be an independence thinker,” and it sounds confusing to you, make a chart of the forms of words you think you might want to change (following the model below).

| Noun | Adjective | Verb | Adverb |
|--------------|------------------|-------------|---------------|
| independence | independent | X | independently |