

FAULTY PREDICATION

Sentences with faulty predication contain a basic structure that is illogical. Some of the problems that result in poor predication include using passive voice, misusing linking verbs, and using dummy subjects.

Agency: Active vs. Passive Sentence Construction

1. The brilliant **essay was written** by John.
2. **John wrote** the brilliant **essay**.

John is the person who wrote the essay, so he is the agent in both of these sentences. Sentence #1 is passive because the agent is "disguised" as the object of a preposition, and the receiver of the action is occupying the subject slot. Sentence #2 is active because the agent is also the grammatical subject of the sentence. Notice the active sentence is shorter and more direct than the passive sentence.

1. A **book can be read** in which **Caesar was killed** by Brutus.
2. **You can read** how **Brutus killed Caesar**.

Here's a double agency problem. In sentence #1, not only is the agent of the murder held hostage by a preposition, but the reader of the book is anonymous. In sentence #2, the book has a reader who is also the grammatical subject of the independent clause, and Brutus, the perpetrator, is the subject of the dependent clause.

Advantages of using active voice sentence structure in expository essays:

- clearly defined agent
- action verb creates immediacy
- strong declarative structure

(Passive sentence structure is sometimes used when the agent is unknown, or in business and social settings to avoid the appearance of blame or unfair accusation, or to emphasize the receiver of the action. So, in all fairness, there is a time and a place for passive construction, but it usually has no place in thesis-driven expository essays such as those written for English, history, and humanities courses.)

EXERCISES: Revise these passive sentences to make them active.

1. The computer class was attended by many students.
2. The issues were clouded and the listeners inflamed by the irate speakers.
3. The call to arms was responded to eagerly by many who were motivated by a thirst for liberty.
4. For a violinist to be a success, many types of bowings and scales must be mastered.

5. The fact that the town was obliterated by the hurricane was bad enough, but it was also further victimized by looters

Misuse of Linking Verbs: Faulty Equations

1. The **thesis** of this paper **is** the **difficulty** of solving our environmental problems.
2. **Solving** our environmental problems **is** more **difficult** than many people believe.

SVC in sentence #1 is "thesis is difficulty." In other words, "thesis =difficulty." While we may often feel this is theoretically true, this misuse of the linking verb "is" sets up a faulty equation, which becomes a predication problem. Notice the second sentence also uses the linking verb, but the equation is plausible: "solving = difficult."

1. **Determining** the type of clouds that are in the sky **is** one **aspect** of a weather observer's occupation.
2. A weather **observer determines** the **type** of clouds in the sky.

Sentence #2 not only removes the faulty equation (determining = aspect), but it also replaces the linking verb with an action verb, making a stronger and tighter sentence.

1. **Dejection is when** you feel you've run out of options.
2. **Dejection is** a dangerous **mood**.

Sentence #1 shows another form of faulty equation, "dejection = when." Sentence #2 is a true equation, "dejection = mood."

Dummy Subjects and Wordiness

1. **It is** a well-known **fact** that exercise strengthens muscles.
2. **Exercise strengthens muscles.**
1. **There are** several **ways** of interpreting the economic indicators.
2. Economic **indicators challenge** interpreters' **abilities**.

In sentences #1, "it" and "there" do not represent the real topic; hence, they are "dummy subjects," just taking up space. They also use linking verbs, creating a stasis in the SVC of the independent clauses of each sentence: it is fact, and there are ways. The real topic is hidden in an adjective clause in the first sentence and a participial phrase in the second. Sentences #2 put the real topic in the driver's seat as the grammatical subject and replace the linking verb with an action verb, again creating a strong, tight sentence.

1. The **reason** the state legislature consistently votes for tax increases **is because** of the myriad of special interest projects that need to be funded.
2. The **pressure** to fund a myriad of special interest projects **forces** the **members** of the state legislature to vote consistently for tax increases.
1. The first **matter** to consider **is how** far we can go without letting the opposition gain the upper hand.

2. First, **we must consider** the **space** we can allow before the opposition gains the upper hand.

Again, the SVC's bolded in the first sentences are passive and faulty. "Reason...is because" and "matter...is how" merely serve as a wordy frame for the meaningful part of the sentences. SVO's (subject-verb-objects) in the second sentences are active and focused on the topic since the agent is also the grammatical subject.

1. With a knowledge of the history of words, it will enable a student to read with a keener understanding. (problem areas underlined)
2. **Knowledge** of the history of words **enables** a **student** to read with keener understanding.

Sentence #1 presents the real topic of the sentence as an object of a preposition, not as the grammatical subject. Sentence #2 corrects this and eliminates the redundant subject "it."

1. Owning a vast amount of acreage, this is how the wealthy man was perceived by the community.
2. The **community perceived** the **man** as wealthy because he owned a vast amount of acreage.

A misplaced modifier, a dummy subject, a faulty equation, and passive construction make sentence #1 a real mess. Sentence #2 corrects these problems.

To Avoid Predication Problems

- avoid passive construction in expository essay writing -- make the agent of the action the grammatical subject of the sentence and give the agent an action verb
- avoid using "it" and "there" as dummy subjects
- avoid wordy frames
- test all equations
- make sure all subjects, verbs, and objects are compatible in meaning

Exercises

Rewrite sentences to remove predication problems.

1. A tragedy is when all the main characters die at the end.
2. The artistic capabilities of the whales of this species are the variations they produce on musical sequences.
3. The reason I think I would rather live in Florida is because of what I read in a travel brochure.

4. Only once is how many times Huck lies to Jim.
5. The value of competition in business and industry is almost invaluable.
6. It is a well-known fact that there are too many commercials on TV.
7. By using a spectroscope it is possible for many metals to be identified by a laboratory technician.
8. A gift shop stood by the waterfall where I bought what was to become my favorite necklace.
9. Any player sick on the night of a game would have meant the loss of said game.
10. People will flock to this lovely valley, build homes here, and expand into towns.
11. My dad being unable to control his temper meant the difference between peace and pandemonium at our house.
12. Picking out the proper clothing for the weather is how my mother rose to fame in the household.