QUESTIONS

AND PRINCIPLES

FOR SENTENCE-CONSTRUCTION

(Q P S)

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Learningguild has and recommends the motto "**We can educate ourselves** (sometimes with personal guidance)". John's extensive publications are offered with that in mind. There is the book ***Making up Sentences***, which is a guide to both grammar and good writing, progressively suited to the stages of a good secondary education whether for young people or for adults. There are three booklets: the elementary ***Sentences to Study and Change***, this advanced one, and ***Reasoning***, and a one-page guide called "Seven features of a good talk or paper". Links to all of these are in the **Introduction** to the Sets of Documents on our website learningguild.org.au. Also available are a booklet-and-CD called ***Sounds, Words, Sentences*** for those who want to speak English with greater clarity and precision, and another called ***Say It Well*** for young children.

The website includes the programme for the Sunday Meetings attended by some of our Melbourne members. There may be a talk followed by discussion, or shorter contributions, or music. Occasionally we have a picnic. John would gladly receive proposals for similar groups elsewhere. Learningguild in Melbourne especially welcomes and seeks to assist refugees and immigrants, e.g. through our extensive vegetable garden and our library. On the website there is a section for News, Views, Recommendations and Questions (NVRQ). We have published since 1989 a magazine called ***Learningguild Letter***, now annual, of which past issues are all on the website and/or in print.

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Questions and Principles for Sentence-construction

Plain Words, *Rebecca Gowers's revision of the classic book by her great-grandfather Sir Ernest Gowers,* The Complete Plain Words*, is Penguin's replacement (2015) of the third and revised edition. The book was originally published in 1954 by Her Majesty's Stationery Office in London, with an eye to the improvement of civil servants' English. I revised in 2016 the article of mine that was published in* Learningguild Letter *1.2013, was related to that third edition, and had the title repeated above. I have since made further changes.*

The path to discovery, and to getting things right or doing things well, often begins with the asking of appropriate questions. One such question is "Have I reached a point where it's easy to go wrong, and, if so, what principle should I follow?".

In the past five decades, widespread failure in English-speaking countries to require the study of the grammar of many kinds of good sentences, and therefore extensive practice in both construction and correction of sentences, has led to ignorance of specific questions worth asking and principles to be applied. Hence many mistakes. In this article I go from question to question, propose principles, and offer for correction examples of errors that they rule out.

Numerous principles are to be found in a book that deserves sustained study in every English-speaking country by every senior secondary teacher and student, undergraduate, postgraduate, university teacher, journalist and report-writer, and by all others who value good writing. Yet the third edition of *The Complete Plain Words*, published by Penguin in 1987 with further revision of Sir Ernest Gowers's book, was little known, especially outside Britain, in the following 28 years. The original, by a very distinguished civil servant, had been widely regarded as an indispensable guide to clear and concise writing in what Australians call the public service. Now Rebecca Gowers has gone back to and revised her great-grandfather's original text, and produced the very good book *Plain Words*, which includes as a preface a fascinating account of him.

How ridiculous it is that, in recent secondary and tertiary education in English-speaking countries, there has seldom been the critical conservationism that would lead to the recognition that Gowers is a classic that could and should be studied and digested **over several years**. How many mistakes (and how much correction by those who have to correct letters or reports drafted incompetently), how much wordy or imprecise writing, could thus be averted, and how much clear and satisfying communication fostered!

One function of my own book *Making up Sentences* (third edition, 2021), known as *MS*, is to prepare the way for effective use of Gowers in self-education by explaining many grammatical terms used there. The inside cover opposite gives a fuller account of *MS* and invites attention to Learningguild's Sets of Documents.

My indented examples of going wrong are all from the book I reviewed in *Learningguild Letter* 1.2013, *Life Surfing Life Dancing*. I follow the practice of Gowers in not giving names of authors or page-references for such examples. The reader is invited, in oral or written work or both, to correct the fault or faults in each. Use numerals as in '1.1' for 'I have briefly …' below. Sets of words not presented as sentences should not be turned into sentences.

1. Would this sentence be better if it were shorter, or turned into two or more?

Gowers has an excellent chapter (VI) on the avoidance of verbosity, and a short section on sentences (pp. 265-7), where she gives and illustrates a basic principle, and yet leaves an error uncorrected: "The two main things to be remembered about sentences if you want to make your meaning plain is that they should be short and should have unity of thought." I invite the reader not only to spot that error but to correct it in two ways, and to consider which he or she prefers.

1. I have briefly referred to aspects of health and wellbeing within this chapter, but I want to formally acknowledge that I do not believe I have come anywhere near close enough to adequately doing this range of topics justice.

2. While we are all aware of the fairly rapid relief one can obtain from taking a painkiller to alleviate a headache, there are very few circumstances of a consumer actually feeling better/stronger/healthier within a reasonable time scale (hours/days or longer) after swallowing a dietary/nutrient supplement.

A long subject-locution (for that term, see the following section), from 'The two' to 'plain', led Sir Ernest Gowers to forget the plurality with which he had begun, and none of his revisers (not even Rebecca, who altered the set of words 'by those who want to make their meaning plain') has noticed that! We can correct the error by changing 'The two main things' to 'The main principle' or by changing 'is' to 'are' and inserting a second 'that they'. I prefer the first for its brevity, enhanced if we drop the second 'should'. We can even halve the number of words with the more moderate and better advice "Don't obscure what you have to say by unnecessary length or complexity in any sentence."

2. Is this personed verb part of a matching pair?

Those two terms are my own (*MS* 1:7). Rebecca Gowers discusses the matter with good examples on pp. 189-196. 'Personed verb' has the same meaning as the old 'finite verb', i.e., a verb describable, in its particular context, as a 1st-person, or as a 2nd-person, or as a 3rd-person form. Students can be asked to give such a verb its **label** from the table-of-six that runs in two columns from '1S' ('1st person singular') to '3P' ('3rd person plural'), and applies in the first instance to personal pronouns (the two sets of six beginning with 'I' and with 'me', in which the 3S forms are 'he/she/it' and 'him/her/it').

Unusually among grammarians, I consider it essential to have a terminology that enables one consistently to distinguish clearly between what I call a subject-locution (Sub-L) and what I call a subject. In 'Ann was praised', 'Ann', the **word**, used to refer to a particular woman of that name, is entirely different from the **woman** Ann herself, whom I call, appropriately, the subject of the sentence. Sir Ernest was mostly consistent in using the word 'subject' to refer to the linguistic item, but he nevertheless wrote of someone who "must have started with the intention of making the Tate Gallery (about which he was writing) the subject of his sentence", and Rebecca keeps that on p.224, except to alter the parenthesis to "(the true topic here)". The Tate Gallery in London is here quite naturally called a subject, which may be **referred to** by Sub-Ls such as 'The Tate Gallery' or 'It'. (See *MS* 1:7.1, 3:2.6.)

Rebecca retains the words "The rule that a singular subject requires a singular verb, and a plural subject a plural verb" (p.189), but omits a valuable example of error given but not explained by Sir Ernest: "his refusal to submit to sustained pressures on mind and spirit were worthy of the highest traditions of journalism". It can certainly be brought under the heading of 'Attraction' (see p.192f), but we need such a phrase as 'the **main constituent** of the Sub-L' (main, that is, grammatically). The long Sub-L runs from 'his' to 'spirit', and the main constituent is the singular noun 'refusal', so the verb must be 3S: 'was'.

Let us make this our fundamental rule: in a normal sentence every personed verb and its Sub-L (if it has one: imperatives normally do not), or the main constituent of that Sub-L, must constitute the two parts of **a matching pair**, i.e., one that has for each the same person and number (and so the same label). Mistakes often occur as a result of failure to note and focus on that main constituent, which in the Gowers sentence quoted in our first section is the word 'things'.

1. other types of studies where the health of people have been followed for years
2. The mysteries of passion, love, and how to best live day to day in a couple relationship is one of the most constant subject of conversations.
3. each [of the two partners] were keeping a tally of all the dishes that were not put in the dishwasher

3. Am I presenting a direct question or an embedded one?

We say 'How old is he?' but 'I want to know how old he is.' and 'Do you know how old he is?'. The first and third have question marks because they are direct questions; the second is a **statement** and so has no question mark; both the second and the third "embed" a question, whose verb therefore has the position it would have in the simple statement 'He is 34.' The phrase 'embedded question' is a vivid one, but Gowers has the commoner 'indirect question'. On p.263 of the excellent chapter on punctuation, such questions are distinguished from direct ones.

1. the next question is why would one want to be happy?
2. We ask them … to think about what sort of person do they want to be?

4. Should I use a pronoun here?

Gowers's excellent principle (p.204) is "Do not be shy of pronouns." They enable a speaker or writer to avoid cumbersome repetition of nouns or noun phrases. Often the pronoun will be in one or other of the two groups called personal (see the first paragraph of Sec. 2 above). It is also often useful to employ *that* or *those* as a demonstrative pronoun, especially in comparisons, so as to compare comparables precisely and neatly, as in 'Bob's success was more surprising than that/those of Meg and Jo.' The importance of **parsing** becomes clear when we realize that *that* may be "a conjunction, a relative pronoun [or] a demonstrative pronoun" (p.216) – or an adjective, as in 'that cat'. *One* and *ones* are often useful as pronouns.

1. Your goals should be achievable and realistic and you may like to gradually work your way up to meeting your goals.
2. considerable efforts are being made by foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
3. each couple has its own unique emotional ecology, which is different to every other couple
4. when there is a loss of attunement in their closest relationships, such as their mother, father or partner
5. The battle is with the excess of foods with completely different nutrient compositions to unprocessed foods; often these new processed foods are rich in energy, [etc.]

4. Should I use or avoid a participle here?

The relevant area in Gowers is pp. 222-6. Because I think that present and past participles are best considered together, and that Rebecca Gowers is mistaken in counting as participles 'concerning' used as a preposition and 'supposing' used as a conjunction, and in saying that the participle 'working' is the verb in 'was working' (it's the main part of the two-word verb), I shall give my own explanations here, and refer to *MS* 3:5. In verbs called regular, the present participle is made by adding *ing* and the past participle by adding *ed,* or replacing *y* by *ied*: *lifting*, *lifted*; *carrying*, *carried.* A consonant may have to be repeated: *hopping*, *hopped* (contrast *hoping, hoped*). In irregular verbs too the present participle is made by adding *ing*, but the past participle has to be learnt in each case. e.g., *gone*, *driven*, *bought*. Often a participle is used after one or more little words called auxiliaries to make **one** personed verb (see Section 2 above), as in *was working* or *has been bought*. Error arises not there but in the adjectival use, as in 'Jumping on the bus, her purse fell', where the participle 'Jumping' is **unconnected** ('unattached' is the word in Gowers): it is not tied to any noun, pronoun or phrase, and 'she dropped her purse' is needed.

A gerund is a noun derived from a verb, as in 'It was his interrupting [of] her that led to that remark of Susan's', where the possessive form *his* is clearly preferable to *he* or *him* followed by *interrupting* as a participle. At least for living beings, and where the focus is on an action or feature rather than on the being concerned, it is better to have a possessive form followed by a gerund than the bare noun or pronoun followed by a participle. Gerunds too can be wrongly unconnected. Sometimes it is better to reconstruct one's sentence to avoid using either a participle or a gerund. (See Gowers for examples.)

Recently it has become common, especially among journalists, to use in a second part of a sentence the cumbersome 'with … -ing', as in 'There is disagreement over this new tax, with some arguing that …', instead of using, after a colon, a personed verb, as in the far preferable 'some argue'. Sometimes one could start a new sentence.

1. vitamin A toxicity occurred in some polar expeditions as a result of the intrepid travellers consuming the livers of their dogs, which were loaded with vitamin A following the dogs being fed on seals
2. This research has been repeated with similar results elsewhere, with a trial being considered in Australia in the near future.
3. this has led to more people being able to afford eating away from home
4. White Australia was settled with our first soldiers, the Rum Corps, being paid in alcohol.
5. trauma and emotional pain that result in us not feeling safe
6. despite most Australians disapproving of extramarital encounters
7. Taking us back to Tilda and chocolate, she [Tilda] had made the logical connection between palm oil and chocolate
8. without developing these feelings, they will fade when confronted with the demands, stresses and traumas of life

5. Do I have an appropriate structure?

That is an important question to ask about one's essay, paper, talk, or thesis. (See, in Set A of our Documents,

my page "Seven features of a good talk or paper".) But for sentences it arises too, especially where familiar **pairs** occur, such as the combination of *both* and *and*, each of which needs to introduce a word or set of words that is **parallel** in form to the other and fits preceding words. (The same applies to sets in bullet-point form.)

Gowers deals well with 'both … and …' in Chapter IX, on p.178. That whole chapter, especially its early section headed "TROUBLES IN ARRANGEMENT", deserves close attention. "Danger Ditches", to use the title of a handwritten book a Welsh teacher of French required us pupils at a London school in 1947-8 to maintain, include *however* (**not** equivalent to the conjunction *but*!), *including*, *because*, *as* and *as to*. It should often be asked whether a particular verb is used transitively (i.e. with an object-locution), e.g. *raise*, and so can be put into the passive, or intransitively, e.g. *rise*, or in both ways, e.g. *break*. (*MS* 3:3.)

Is my first example of error satisfactorily corrected on the book's back cover by the addition of *from* after *also*?

1. [The writers] discuss their views on well-being, based not only on their clinical and research roles, but also their life experiences.
2. good habits of interaction and conversation make the issues either feel manageable or resolvable
3. the Internet is a medium by which a person with depression who values self-reliance and believes that they should help themselves can do just that.
4. just because you might, at times, feel stupid doesn't mean you are!
5. The tension we experience is because we latch on to and pull against what is taking place.
6. [if their emotions are not concealed] as a couple it is more obvious how each other feels.
7. You are free to give as much or as little information as you feel comfortable.
8. experience success in all areas of life including in the workplace
9. It is worth discussing with your partner as to whether people … honour and respect your partner and your relationship.
10. Herpes is most likely to be transmitted during an active phase, however it is possible to transmit the virus at any time.
11. These issues … do not resolve with substance use.
12. [Concerning "substances".] try to ensure you fall into the group of people who can enjoy, in a balanced fashion.
13. This book explains about the importance of finding a good general practitioner

7. Is this a comparison in which *like* or *unlike* is the right word?

Gowers's sound principle for written English is on p.181: "in formal English prose … *like* must not be treated as a conjunction". When it is correctly followed by a noun or pronoun with no accompanying verb, but often with a comma, as in 'like Bill,' or 'like him,' it is a preposition. In Gowers's example of error 'like success does', it is used as a conjunction beginning a subordinate clause (i.e., a set of words which, though including a Sub-L and a personed verb, could not be a normal sentence: see *MS* 2:4), and should be replaced by *as*. Sometimes *like* itself is acceptable, but as a preposition followed by *that* or *those* as a pronoun along with a preposition such as *of*, to ensure that comparable entities are compared (see Section 4). *Unlike* too is often wrongly used: try the same remedy.

1. the man proceeded to consume [most] of the food in a manner like a dog guards its dinner plate
2. just like focusing on our own strengths enables us to be at our best
3. like elsewhere on the body, irritation can occur as a result
4. like trying to describe an elephant, the description [of mindfulness] will vary depending on which part of the elephant we focus on.
5. unlike some countries around the world, GPs in Australia undergo extensive professional training to be recognised as GPs.

8. At this point, is this the best word or phrase to employ?

The seventh chapter of Gowers recommends the choice of the familiar word, and the eighth that of the precise one. Both are full of humour and of apt examples of ineptitude, as in the discussion of "clichés and overworked metaphors" (pp. 149-163). In Chapter IV there is a valuable list of "words and phrases often used incorrectly", such as *reticent* (where *reluctant* would be correct) and *mitigate* (*militate*).

In the book from which I have taken examples of defective writing, there is a quotation from "one of the founding fathers of positive psychology", Christopher Peterson: "When once asked … to sum up this exciting new science of happiness, Chris responded with these three simple and profound words: 'other people matter'." How valuable it is to consider whether *study* is better than *science* there (and whether to omit the phrase 'these three simple and profound words').

A word may itself be usable in a given context but need a different construction.

1. They had three children, substantive careers, a mortgage, a dog and two cats.
2. Tom had been very impacted by the pressures of work
3. In the highly dangerous world of our stone-aged ancestors
4. Not every lump is a STI.
5. There are, of course, multitude ways we can lose our equilibrium.
6. Before we look at how to practically do this
7. A standard drink is 10 gm of alcohol.
8. Although sex seems to be ever more prescient in our modern day lives
9. thinking about how to engage the population through emotional registers
10. If you are unsure, discuss products with your doctor prior to use.
11. Perhaps it is because we have approached the problem from the point of view of facts and rational argument rather than from the point of view of story and embodied rationality.
12. but as I will refer to throughout this chapter, there are many myths and misconceptions about happiness

9. Do I need to use this nounal adjective, especially if it is one of two or more?

We read in Gowers (p.143) "Serious harm is … being done to the language by excessive use of nouns as adjectives". One following illustration is 'Our whole sugar import requirements', to be replaced by 'All the sugar we need to import'. Sometimes a nounal adjective should be followed by a hyphen.

1. when your natural relationship building and repair processes get stuck
2. there are other health benefits of smoking cessation
3. This section discusses the role of flexibility in our lives and time management including how to manage the great time wasters.

10. Should I split this *to*-infinitive?

We have a *to*-infinitive at 'to explain' in 'I am able to explain that', and a bare infinitive at 'explain' in 'I can explain that'. The word 'infinitive' has been used in contrast to 'finite', the traditional adjective for what in Section 2 I have called personed verbs. This *to* is not a preposition (**no** preposition can be used directly before an infinitive): it can be called a particle or an infinitive marker. Gowers discusses the contentious subject of split infinitives on pp. 232-6, allows some, and includes an example of a series of *to*-infinitives in which the splitting is ridiculous. Examples could also have been provided of short but still awkward groups in which the *to*-infinitive is unnecessarily split, as in the examples I give here. Often a *to*-infinitive that is not split communicates our meaning more crisply.

1. how to more effectively communicate food-related health risks via the media
2. We all need to continually learn about what draws us together
3. and to not have more than four standard drinks on a special occasion
4. With the advent of the Internet, it is now possible to quickly connect with other people who are 'in the same boat'.
5. it is better to not answer than to give misleading information

11. Is a hyphen needed here?

Gowers covers the ground well on pp. 255-7. A hyphen is needed by an adjective made up from two or more words to make its being an adjective immediately plain. An example given is one that without a hyphen produces a "false scent" (see the note at p.125f): 'When government financed projects in the development area have been grouped'.

1. this won't lead to laugh out loud happiness
2. these strengths are trait like
3. In a recapitulation of the lotus eaters story

12. Has an apostrophe been wrongly omitted or wrongly used?

On p.238f there is useful discussion, though 'some' is needed twice in the first sentence, before 'names' and before 'pronouns', and instead of the next two paragraphs we could have the following single sentence. An apostrophe followed by *s* is used in the possessive of short nouns ending with *s*, but there is no apostrophe before an *s* in pronouns already possessive (thus *Jones's*, but *theirs* and *its*). The *s* is not added after the apostrophe for Greek names such as *Socrates*, but may be added after *Jesus* and should,

I suggest, be added after *Gowers*, lest someone hearing a reference to "Gowers' book" should suppose that the name is *Gower*.

1. because its good for us
2. accept each others shortcomings
3. that others opinions are not important
4. people change their own and other peoples behaviour

13. What is the reason why I should or should not put a comma here?

There are many misuses of commas in the book from which I have taken for this booklet instances of defective expression. I suspect that some writers were influenced by the bad advice from a teacher "Put a comma where you think you should pause." Rightly Gowers distinguishes the numerous **grammatical** reasons for putting or not putting a comma and the **rhetorical** ones, where emphasis is given to a previous word or phrase by a punctuation mark that requires a short pause if one is reading aloud, though such pauses may be justified in other places where a comma would be grammatically wrong.

I think the adjective 'identifying' clearer than 'defining' (in contrast with 'commenting') for the relative clause in "Pilots whose minds are dull do not usually live long" (see p.245).

I doubt if any of the Gowers family has ever understood a sentence to be "such a portion of a composition or utterance as extends from one full stop to another" (p.265). (Why was Rebecca wrong to change Sir Ernest's version of that by inserting 'a' before 'composition'?) Say rather that a written sentence is a set of words separated from any actual or imaginable following set by having at its end a full stop, a question mark, or an exclamation mark. What does a **normal** sentence, other than an imperative one, require in addition? A matching pair of subject-locution and personed verb (see Section 2 above), and a structure other than one that would be right for a subordinate clause (*MS* 2.4). The previous sentence was, allowably, not a normal one, because it was an answer to a question and, straight after the question, did not need to begin with 'A normal sentence … requires'.

It is better to use the locution 'two or more sets of words (not short and parallel) that **could** each be a sentence', where those sets are wrongly separated by an **inadequate comma**, than to call those sets of words sentences (p.242). Another useful term is '**interrupting** locution and its verb.

I invite the reader to study the whole of Gowers's section on commas, and indeed the whole chapter on punctuation. Apart from learning to punctuate well oneself, one can thereby be stimulated to think, speak and write in ways that were previously beyond one's ken. It is extremely educative to read prose, and poetry, that has been accurately and sensitively punctuated, and to read aloud (sometimes to children) in appreciative accordance with the punctuation. One example, familiar to me since childhood, is A.A.Milne's "Teddy Bear" (in *When we were very young*, 1924), beginning

A bear, however hard he tries,
Grows tubby without exercise.

Another is Sir Isaiah Berlin's account of Mill's education, in Section 1 of his lecture of 1959 "John Stuart Mill and the ends of life", included in the collection of papers by Berlin entitled *Liberty* (2002).

I have arranged the first eight erroneous examples in the same order as Gowers's first, second, third and sixth categories of errors. Neither Sir Ernest nor Rebecca felt a need to warn against what we might call the now-I-pause use of a comma.

1. It is a well-known fact, condoms are protective against STIs.
2. Not all of us have the privilege, or the opportunity to be able to choose slow food.
3. he had emotionally settled to some degree by thinking about, and facing the worst possibility.
4. Homeric narratives, such as that of the lotus eaters also bring us into contact
5. They needed to have the conversations, which they had not known how to have
6. many women report that the father's devotion and quality of nurturing of a sick or crying child, increased his attractiveness as a man and partner
7. They did not understand why their attempts to 'make things better' and to bring more joy in their life, so quickly faded into emotional insignificance.
8. The transformation of the lifeworld when encountering chronic disease, connects us to the world around us in a profound way.
9. We do not communicate well or deeply, we waste our time and, we do not enjoy our life.
10. And, that brings me to a question.
11. But, it is not all bad news.
12. So, to bring this rambling reflection together.