

Editing: Meaningful Word and Punctuation Choices

The English language can be confusing because it has so many seemingly arbitrary rules, and not all resources that explain these rules make them accessible beyond rote memorization. The missing element in many resources is a method for retaining that information logically. Specifically, putting the rules of grammar in terms of how they interact with meaning creates a link that facilitates comprehension.

Strategy: Stop, Translate, and Decide

No definitive list of steps can be a one-size-fits-all solution to every issue, but a general set of steps can help you engage logically with a challenging concept. The strategy outlined in this handout is divided into three steps: stop, translate, and decide.

Stop

To stop is simply to pause for enough time to consider meaning. This step is mostly self-explanatory, but it is crucial to remember that this method involves more critical thinking than tacit knowledge.

Translate

To translate is to break a sentence down to its core meaning. This step requires looking precisely at definitions and syntax.

Decide

To decide is to pick the most appropriate option according to the translation.

The rest of this handout will walk you through some examples of this strategy in practice and ask you to complete some activities to practice the strategy yourself.

<i>Example 1: If vs. Whether</i>	
Which example is correct? Why?	
1. I don't care <u>if</u> you get good grades.	
2. I don't care <u>whether</u> you get good grades.	
Stop	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider the true meaning of "if." It translates to "in the event that."• Consider the definition of "whether." It denotes a statement that applies to either of multiple alternatives.
Translate	Translate each sentence. "I don't care if you get good grades" translates to "In the event that you get good grades, I don't care." "I don't care whether you get good grades" translates to "Regardless of how good your grades are, I don't care."

Decide	Gauge whether “In the event of you getting good grades, I don’t care” accurately reflects your meaning by comparing it to “Regardless of how good your grades are, I don’t care.”
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Generally, “whether” is the correct choice, expressing that the speaker does not care about the quality of the other person’s grades. However, “if” is correct when the event of the other person getting good grades triggers the speaker not caring. Expanding this sentence to provide context can clarify this relationship. For example, with an added prepositional phrase, “I don’t care about your work habits if you get good grades” shows that the other person’s getting good grades leads the speaker not to care about that person’s work habits.

Activity 1: Deciding About Word Choice Through Meaning

Sometimes, two different words or phrases seem like viable choices in a sentence. As a writer, you may be tempted to choose indiscriminately, for the words or phrases seem interchangeable. However, in many cases, the choice heavily influences the meaning of the sentence. In some instances, certain choices are necessarily incorrect; in others, either choice could work, but each suggests a specific meaning that will not work in every case.

In this activity, your job is to translate each sentence to represent its meaning without the use of the underlined word. Then, determine whether each choice is ever appropriate to use. Finally, explain why. If a choice is never appropriate to use, explain. If it can be, explain in which cases it would be appropriate.

<i>Example 2: If vs. Whether</i>	
Which example is correct? Why?	
1. I do not know <u>if</u> the concert takes place today or tomorrow.	
2. I do not know <u>whether</u> the concert takes place today or tomorrow.	
Stop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider the true meaning of “if.” It translates to “in the event that.” Consider the definition of “whether.” It denotes a statement that applies to either of multiple alternatives.
Translate	<p>Translate each sentence.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The concert may take place today or tomorrow, but I do not know that it will take place on either day. The concert will take place either today or tomorrow, but I do not know on which of the two days it will take place.
Decide	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Yes. This example is acceptable if writers mean to say that they do not know if the concert will occur at all on either of the two days. Yes. This example is acceptable if writers mean to say that they know the concert will occur on one of the two days, but they do not know which one.

1. “Affect” vs. “Effect”

- a. The documentary affected changes in global policy.
- b. The documentary effected changes in global policy.

Stop: Look up the definitions of these two words. Write them below.

Affect:

Effect:

Translate:

- a.
- b.

Decide:

- a.
- b.

2. “If” vs. “Whether”

- a. I do not know if Marina likes to eat chicken or pork.
- b. I do not know whether Marina likes to eat chicken or pork.

Stop: Look up the definitions of these two words. Write them below.

If:

Whether:

Translate:

- a.
- b.

Decide:

- a.
- b.

3. “Complement” vs. “Compliment”

- a. Oscar complements Tasha’s new happy-go-lucky attitude.
- b. Oscar compliments Tasha’s new happy-go-lucky attitude.

Stop: Look up the definitions of these two words. Write them below.

Complement:

Compliment:

Translate:

- a.
- b.

Decide:

- a.
- b.

4. “Couldn’t Care Less” vs. “Could Care Less”

- a. I couldn’t care less whether you like to do your homework.
- b. I could care less whether you like to do your homework.

Stop: Think through the use of the negative contraction *couldn’t* together with *less*.

Translate:

- a.
- b.

Decide:

- a.
- b.

5. “Wary” vs. “Weary”

- a. I am wary because I have been hurt so many times.
- b. I am weary because I have been hurt so many times.

Stop: Look up the definitions of these two words. Write them below.

Wary:

Weary:

Translate:

- a.
- b.

Decide:

- a.
- b.

6. “Since” vs. “Because”

- a. I have been hungry since my microwave broke.
- b. I have been hungry because my microwave broke.

Translate:

- a.
- b.

Decide:

- a.
- b.

Activity 2: Deciding About Punctuation Through Meaning

Sometimes, a punctuation mark can drastically change the meaning of a sentence. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how punctuation affects meaning.

In this activity, your job is to translate each sentence to clarify how the underlined punctuation marks function. Then, determine whether each choice is ever appropriate to use. Finally, explain why. If a choice is never appropriate to use, explain. If it can be, explain in which cases it would be appropriate.

<i>Example 3: Comma Use with a Subordinate Clause</i>	
Which example is correct? Why?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. I do not think that Sheila attended the meeting because she is sick. b. Because she is sick, I do not think that Sheila attended the meeting. 	
Stop	Look closely at “because.” Is there more than one verb in this sentence? If so, is it clear to which verb “because” applies? If not, how can you make that clear?
Translate	Translate each sentence. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. I do not think that the reason Sheila attended the meeting is that she is sick. b. Because she is sick, I do not think that Sheila attended the meeting.
Decide	a. Somewhat. It is unclear whether “because” applies to “attended” or “think.” If it applies to “attended,” writers could mean that although Sheila attended the meeting, they do not know whether her being sick is why. If it applies to “think,” writers could mean that Sheila’s being sick has led them to think that she did not attend the meeting. For the former meaning, writers may clarify by following the sentence with

	another, such as “I think she attended for another reason.” For the latter, option b is the clearest choice. b. Yes. This example is acceptable if writers mean to say that Sheila’s being sick has led them to think that she did not attend the meeting.
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1. Comma With “Because”

- a. I do not want to study because I have a lot of homework.
- b. Because I have a lot of homework, I do not want to study.

Translate:

- a.
- b.

Decide:

- a.
- b.

2. Comma With Adjectives

- a. At the church, I had a deep religious experience.
- b. At the church, I had a deep, religious experience.

Translate:

- a.
- b.

Decide:

- a.
- b.

3. Comma With Names

- a. I would like to eat Jerry.
- b. I would like to eat, Jerry.

Translate:

- a.
- b.

Decide:

- a.
- b.

Answer Key for Activity 1

1. Translate:

- a. Changes in global policy existed independently of the documentary, but the documentary later impacted them.
- b. Changes in global policy did not exist independently of the documentary; the documentary catalyzed them.

Decide:

- a. Yes. This example is acceptable if writers mean to say that the documentary impacted preexisting changes in global policy.
- b. Yes. This example is acceptable if writers mean to say that the documentary was the source of changes in global policy.

2. Translate:

- a. Marina may like to eat chicken or pork, but I do not know that she likes to eat either.
- b. Marina either likes to eat chicken or pork, but I do not know which one.

Decide:

- a. Yes. This example is acceptable if writers mean to say that they do not know that Marina likes to eat either type of meat at all.
- b. Yes. This example is acceptable if writers mean to say that they know Marina likes to eat one of these types of meat, but they do not know which one.

3. Translate:

- a. Oscar speaks nicely to Tasha about her new happy-go-lucky attitude.
- b. Oscar suits Tasha's new happy-go-lucky attitude.

Decide:

- a. Yes. This example is acceptable if writers mean to say that Oscar is saying kind words to Tasha about her new happy-go-lucky attitude.
- b. Yes. This example is acceptable if writers mean to say that Oscar is a positive component to Tasha's new happy-go-lucky attitude.

4. Translate:

- a. I care so little about how much you like doing your homework that I could not care any less.
- b. I care at least somewhat about how much you like doing your homework, so it is possible that I could care less.

Decide:

- a. Yes. This example is acceptable if writers mean to say that they do not care at all whether you like to do your homework.
- b. No. This example is unacceptable as a way for writers to say that they do not care whether you like to do your homework. If they mean to say that they *do* care, there are clearer ways to say it.

5. Translate:

- a. I am cautious because I have been hurt so many times.
- b. I am exhausted because I have been hurt so many times.

Decide:

- a. Yes. This example is acceptable if writers mean to say that being hurt so many times has caused them to be cautious.
- b. Yes. This example is acceptable if writers mean to say that being hurt so many times has caused them to be exhausted.

6. Translate:

- a. From the moment my microwave broke until now, I have been hungry.
- b. As a result of my microwave breaking, I have been hungry.

Decide:

- a. Yes. This example is acceptable if writers mean to say that they have been hungry between now and when their microwave broke.
- b. Yes. This example is acceptable if writers mean to say that they have been hungry as a result of their microwave breaking.

Answer Key for Activity 2

1. Translate:

- a. My reason for wanting to study is not that I have a lot of homework.
- b. Due to my having a lot of homework, I do not want to study.

Decide:

- a. Somewhat. It is unclear whether “because” applies to “study” or “want.” If it applies to “study,” writers could mean that they want to study, but their reason for wanting to study is not that they have a lot of homework. If it applies to “want,” writers could mean that they do not want to study, and their having a lot of homework is why.
- b. Yes. This example is acceptable if writers mean to say that they do not want to study, and their having a lot of homework is why. The comma clarifies the sentence by proving that “because” does not apply to “study.”

2. Translate:

- a. At the church, the religious experience I had was deep.
- b. At the church, the experience I had was deep and religious.

Decide:

- a. Yes. This example is acceptable if writers mean to say that they had a religious experience that was deep.
- b. Yes. This example is acceptable if writers mean to say that they had an experience that was both deep and religious.

3. Translate:

- a. Jerry looks like an appealing meal.
- b. I am telling Jerry that I would like to eat.

Decide:

- a. Unlikely, but yes. This example is acceptable if writers mean to express cannibalistic intent.
- b. Yes. This example is acceptable if writers mean to tell Jerry that they would like to eat.

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