

Garden Path Sentences

Garden path sentences are sentences that mislead or trick their reader into interpreting the sentence incorrectly. Garden path sentences take their name from the idiom, “to be led down the garden path.” According to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, this phrase means “to deceive (someone); to cause (someone) to go, think, or proceed wrongly.”

Here are some well-known examples of garden path sentences:

- The old man the boat.
- The horse raced past the barn fell.
- The complex houses married and single soldiers and their families.

These sentences mislead readers by offering them a word or group of words with familiar meanings—however, the familiar meanings do not actually apply in that circumstance. Thus, the reader is “led down the garden path.” Garden path sentences are often confusing and appear to make no sense despite being grammatically correct. Garden path sentences should be avoided in writing because of their inherent confusing nature.

Form and Function

In English grammar, **form** is concerned with what a word *is*. For example, “jump” is a verb.

Function is concerned with what a word *does* within a sentence. The word “jump” can function as both a verb and a noun. As a verb, “jump” describes the act of jumping, but in the sentence, “He eyed the ski jump uneasily,” “jump” is a noun that names a type of ramp. Keep this idea of function in mind as you read the following well-known example of a garden path sentence:

- “Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana.”

Upon first read-through, this sentence seems to make no sense; fruit cannot fly. Despite the confusing structure, this sentence is grammatically correct. The sentence can be interpreted multiple ways.

When readers come across this sentence for the first time, they usually interpret it like this:

- “Time flies like an arrow” is a figure of speech with “flies” being a verb identifying what the noun “time” does; “fruit flies like a banana” is talking about flying fruit.

Now try reversing the order of the sentence:

- “Fruit flies like a banana; time flies like an arrow.”

The second part of the sentence has now become confusing. In this sentence, the word “flies” can either function as a noun or a verb. The pattern that the reader sees early on affects their reading of the rest of the sentence; in the first half of the example above, “flies” is interpreted as a verb. After the reader sees this pattern, they unconsciously apply it to the next half of the sentence; they assume “flies” is going to be a noun, so are misled into reading “time flies” as a type of insect.

All the confusion that this sentence causes is due to the poor choice of words. “Flies” can function both as a noun and a verb, which can befuddle readers when they cannot tell which is which.

Here are two possible ways to rewrite the sentence for clarity:

- Time flies by as fast as an arrow; fruit flies like eating bananas.
- Fruit flies like eating bananas; time flies by as fast as an arrow.

One takeaway from the “fruit flies” sentence is that you should avoid confusing your reader with words that function as multiple parts of speech in your sentence—read through your writing and watch for words that might pull double duty.

Word Associations

Garden path sentences also arise because of word association; in other words, when words that are commonly seen together and have a typical/familiar meaning end up having a different meaning. Here is a well-known example of a garden path sentence:

- The old man the boat.

Readers typically anticipate that word definitions follow a pattern; they associate a word with a specific part of speech (noun, verb, adjective, adverb) and only adjust their interpretation when the context demands it. In the example above, when “man” comes after “old,” readers expect it to be a noun. Indeed, “man” is most commonly a noun. But in this case, “man” is a verb. With that in mind, read the sentence again. Your interpretation should be something like this:

- The old operate the boat.

“Man” used as a verb is an uncommon usage/definition. Readers don't expect this usage, especially when it appears right after “old”; they see “the old man,” not “the old [operate].”

When the reader comes across sentences like these, they quickly become confused. It takes them multiple readings to puzzle out just what the sentence is trying to say, and even then, they might not figure it out.

Activity 1: Revising Well-Known Garden Path Sentences

For this activity, you will be shown several garden path sentences and will need to identify where the confusion lies. Underline the troublesome words and word associations. After you have taken that step, revise the sentence so it's clearer and less confusing.

Example

- The old man the boat.
 - Revision: The old people operate the boat.

1. The complex houses married and single soldiers and their families.
2. The horse raced past the barn fell.
3. They painted the wall with cracks.

Activity 2: Identifying Issues with Newspaper Headlines

Underline the troublesome words and word associations in the following newspaper headlines. These headlines are real and have all appeared online and in newspapers.

1. Tornado Touches Down in Cemetery—Hundreds Dead
2. Homicide Victims Rarely Talk to Police
3. Stolen Painting Found by Tree
4. Miners Refuse to Work After Death
5. Hospitals Sued by 7 Foot Doctors
6. Red Tape Holds up New Bridge
7. Hershey Bars Protest

Answer Key for Activity 1 (Answers will vary.)

1. The complex houses married and single soldiers and their families.
 - Explanation: Readers interpret “complex houses” as meaning “houses that are complex.” In reality, “complex” means “a group of buildings or facilities.” “Houses” is a verb meaning “to provide with shelter.”
 - Possible Revision: The group of buildings provides housing to married and single soldiers, as well as their families.
2. The horse raced past the barn fell.
 - Explanation: Readers interpret “raced” as a verb. In form and function, “raced” is indeed a verb, but it has a different meaning than what readers expect. Readers expect it to mean the *action* of racing, but in reality, it means “to take someone somewhere quickly.”
 - Possible Revision: The horse that was raced past the barn fell down.
3. The men painted the wall with cracks.
 - Explanation: This sentence is confusing due to awkward word groupings. It is impossible to determine if the men *painted the wall* or if they *painted cracks on*

the wall. There is no single way to explain the sentence because both interpretations could be equally correct.

- Possible Revision One: The men painted the wall that had cracks on it.
- Possible Revision Two: The men used cracks to paint the wall.

Answer Key for Activity 2

1. Tornado Touches Down in Cemetery—Hundreds Dead
(Hundreds of individuals are already dead and buried in a cemetery. Is the headline referring to people who were killed recently by the tornado?)
2. Homicide Victims Rarely Talk to Police
(Homicide victims have been killed—they cannot talk to anyone.)
3. Stolen Painting Found by Tree
(An inanimate object such a tree cannot “find” a “stolen painting”—or anything else!)
4. Miners Refuse to Work After Death
(No one can work after they have died. Presumably this headline is referring to miners who are refusing to work after one of their colleagues died in the mines, but it’s unclear.)
5. Hospitals Sued by 7 Foot Doctors
(The hospitals are not being sued by doctors who are seven feet tall; we can assume that they are being sued by podiatrists—doctors who specialize in feet.)
6. Red Tape Holds up New Bridge
(The phrase “red tape” here is supposed to refer to bureaucratic obstacles, but it instead sounds as if actual tape that it red is supporting a bridge.)
7. Hershey Bars Protest
(“Bars” is supposed to be a verb here, meaning “to prohibit”—meaning that the Hershey company prohibited a protest. However, it instead sounds like “Hershey bars” protested, which is impossible.)

Reference

“Lead (someone) down/up the garden path.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lead%20someone%29%20down%2Fup%20the%20garden%20path>. Accessed 2 Dec. 2022.