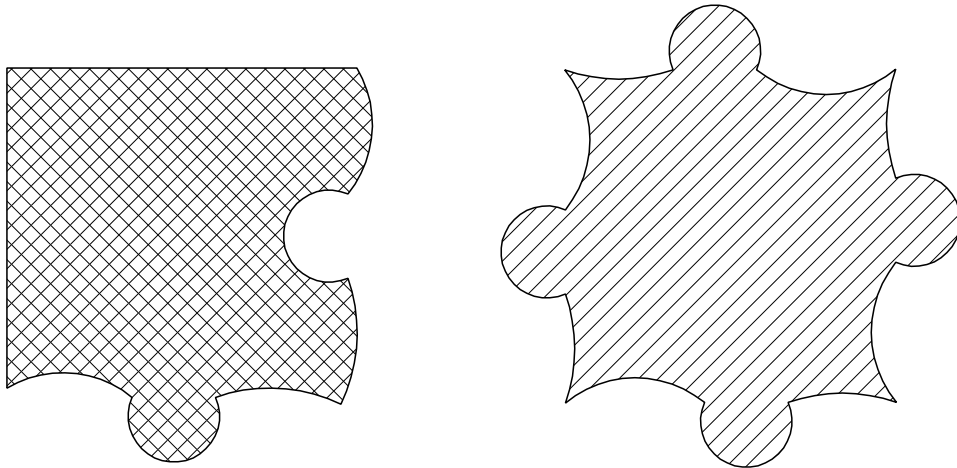


Watch Out for Ambiguous Phrases a Reader Must Puzzle Over



BACKGROUND |

When a word can be taken two ways...

Sometimes, we let a word fall between two phrases—it could refer to either topic, and the reader has to puzzle out which way we meant. Figuring out an ambiguity is always a nuisance, but online, where people have less patience than they exhibit reading a newspaper, such uncertainties make people mad. Anything that drives your readers to debate about what you might have intended, distracts them from your point, and risks heading them in the wrong direction—like off your site.

The amount of thinking that the user has to put in, just to move around the Web site, already burdens the mind. Add to that the barely recalled sequence of pages coming here, and now you are waving puzzle pieces in the readers' faces saying, "Which one did I really mean?"

To reduce what Morkes and Nielsen call "cognitive load," be concise, scannable, and unambiguous.

*Time flies like an arrow.
Fruit flies like a banana.*

—Groucho Marx

Beware modifiers that point forward and backward

Consider this sentence:

Overdoing your fitness routine seriously results in aches and pains.

That *seriously* raises a little uncertainty. Does this sentence mean that seriously overextending yourself can result in aches and pains? Or does the author mean that overexertion must always lead to serious aches and pains?

To avoid unintended double entendres, try these strategies:

- Watch out for adverbs and adjectives that might be taken to modify two different phrases—one before, and one after.
- Place an adverb near its verb.
- Place an adjective before its noun, not after.

It's not a sandwich, except in San Francisco

In the Bay Area, the *It's It* is a patty made out of chocolate wafers with ice cream sandwiched in between. Delicious. But online, where no one knows what it is, beware of pronouns. People have to think a bit to see what the pronoun refers back to. If you give them two or three possible referents, the mind gets dizzy, and the finger clicks away.

So be attentive whenever you realize you have just perpetrated a long sentence or paragraph carrying a lot of nouns and different pronouns, such as:

Marketing mavens addressing their prime customers are vitally concerned about their goals, and they are equally concerned with understanding how features relate to benefits and their own objectives.

Who's *they*?

Sorting out your own pronouns is a service to your readers.

Strategies:

- Repeat the darn noun. At first the repeated noun sounds clunky, even boring. But as Gerry McGovern says, “Boring is beautiful on the Internet, because the Internet is a very functional place.”
- Move the pronoun so it is close to the noun referred to.

*One keeps saying the same thing,
but the fact that one has to say it
is eery.*

—Elias Canetti,
The Human Province

- Use the pronoun only one way in the sentence. If you find three uses of *it*, make sure *it* always refers to the same noun.
- Make the noun explicit. Don't imply a general topic and then refer broadly to "it." You're making readers guess what you mean, and they may guess wrong.

Don't point offstage

On the Web, you can't assume you know where guests have come from, so suggesting they go back to a page they have never seen may seem odd, or raise unpleasant thoughts, even anxiety in some guests. Watch out for relative directions, particularly when borrowing material that was originally written for paper, where *forward*, *above*, *below*, and *back* all have real meaning.

Describe the subject of the page, or use absolute directions. (Jutta Degener, quoted by Levine, 1997)

Ixnay on the creative variations

In a poem designed to be read on paper, we may struggle to find new words to describe the same object, giving the reader new perspectives, new slants, and new overtones. In literature, consistency stinks. Oscar Wilde called it "the last refuge of the unimaginative." Aldous Huxley said, "The only completely consistent people are dead." So go ahead, be inconsistent in life—and poetry.

But when you write practical Web prose, adopt Gertrude Stein's maxim, "A rose is a rose is a rose."

Changing the word you use to describe the rose could make people wonder whether you have begun talking about some new flower altogether.

How can users follow a procedure if the terminology changes, if you call something a *screen* one time and a *window* the next? It's not the user's job to figure out what you mean. It's your job to make it obvious.
(Henning, 2000d)

If you call a gizmo a *stylus* here, don't start referring to the same thing as a *pen*.

If you use the word *user* to refer to a consumer in one paragraph, don't switch in the next paragraph, and write *user* when you really mean developer.

Adopt a controlled vocabulary—a list of terms your team agrees to use, consistently, throughout the site.

By predetermining the terms that make up a controlled vocabulary, and using those terms to describe your site's content, you can minimize the negative effects that variants, synonyms, and various other annoyances can have on your site and its users. (Rosenfeld, 1999)

EXAMPLES

Before

You'll find that information at the top.

...as shown in the table below.

If you go forward, you'll ...

On the next level up, look for ...

Below this section...

Next

Previous

We put 12 rosebuds coated with chocolate entirely on your monthly subscription.

After

You'll find that information on our home page.

... as shown in the table.

In the System White Paper, you'll

In the Security Overview, look for

In the subsection on The Protocol Recommendations

Next: Our extension of this study, Further Thoughts

Previous: The authors' initial report

Once a month, we send you 12 rosebuds entirely coated with chocolate, throughout your subscription.

The families in our cooperative make 100% Scottish cashmere apparel. It creates kilts, capes, scarves, sweaters, pullovers, blankets, and throws. These items are available direct from them, through our secure ordering pages. Click to see [them](#).

The families in our cooperative make 100% Scottish cashmere apparel. We create kilts, capes, scarves, sweaters, pullovers, blankets, and throws. You can buy these items direct from individual families, through our cooperative's secure [ordering pages](#).

The new window may have appeared right on top of the original page, so that you can no longer see that frame.

The new page may have appeared right on top of the original page, obscuring it.

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

How well does this guideline apply?

TO HAVE FUN

Ambiguity may be part of the game. Just make sure you signal your guests that you are being deliberately provocative, not just lazy.

TO LEARN

Half your effort is simply avoiding ambiguity.

TO ACT

Don't make someone pause in mid air, wondering whether you mean A or B.

TO BE AWARE

Poetry and parables work on several levels, referring to different planes of experience. But on each plane, the best lines are unambiguously powerful.

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

In a direct exchange, people overlook accidental ambiguities, if they think they know what you mean. Strangers, though, may choose the worst possible interpretation and send you flames.

See: Fowler, Aaron and Limburg (1992), Henning, (2001d), Horton (1990), Kilian (1999), Levine (1997), McGovern (2001), Morkes and Nielsen (1998), Price and Korman (1993), Rosenfeld (1999), Tarutz (1992), Williams (1994).

For your review only.

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