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# Touching Words

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*Words have to be crafted, not sprayed. They need to be fitted together with infinite care.*

—ATTRIBUTED TO NORMAN COUSINS

Sentences remind me of those little handheld puzzles with numbered tiles that you slide around. You can solve many sentence problems simply by sliding words around until those that belong together are touching. As Strunk and White say, “Keep related words together.”<sup>113</sup> In particular, look for ways to bump related words into each other at these meeting places:

- commas
- colons
- periods, semicolons, or dashes (where independent clauses meet)
- verbs

In the examples below, notice how much more smoothly the sentences read when the first highlighted word or phrase glides into the second.

## **Meet Me at the Comma**

Commas provide a common meeting place for words that belong together. Consider this gem of a botched sentence (found in certain pre-gender-neutralized editions of Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style*):

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<sup>113</sup> Strunk and White, *Elements of Style*, 2nd ed., 22 (page 44 in the illustrated 3rd edition).

## Word Up!

*Before:* As a **mother of five**, with another on the way, **my ironing board** is always up.<sup>114</sup>

This sentence cracks me up. Grammatically, if illogically, *mother of five* modifies the far-away subject of this sentence: *my ironing board*. This pairing calls to mind a pregnant ironing board with five little ironing boards running around it. As a first step toward fixing this sentence, scooch *mother* and *board* (modifier and modified) together.

*Interim:* As an expectant **mother of five**, **my ironing board** is always up.

Bringing these words together reveals the problem: *mother of five* is a dangling modifier, that is, a word or phrase intended to modify a word that's missing. The word that's missing (we can't help but see now) is the sentence's true subject: *I*.

*After:* As an expectant **mother of five**, I always have my ironing board up.

In this corrected (if still laughable) sentence, it's no accident that modifier and modified meet at a comma. If you want to win the word-order game, use the comma as a meeting place. Think of it as a curved version of that slim space between numbered tiles.

Word-matching at a comma also fixes the following misplaced modifiers (*nature lover* in the first example and *wearing my pajamas* in the second).

*Before:* As a **nature lover**, I'm sure **you** would agree that this land is worth preserving. (Here, I'm the nature lover.)

*After:* As a **nature lover**, **you** would surely agree that this land is worth preserving. (Here, you're the nature lover.)

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114. Ibid., 9. (This example, alas, no longer appears in the illustrated 3rd edition.)

*Before:* One morning I shot an elephant **wearing my pajamas**.  
(Groucho Marx)

*After:* One morning, while **wearing my pajamas**, I shot  
an elephant.

Bringing the right words together at a comma fixes not only dangling and misplaced modifiers but also remote relatives. I love this term. Like a kid who lives across the country from Grandma, a remote relative in grammar is a relative pronoun—*that, which, who, whose*—that “lives” too far away from its antecedent. The following example unites the remote relative, *whose*, with its antecedent, *house*. Remote no more!

*Before:* Demolition crews have finally removed an old **house** near the Capitol Building, **whose** owners had previously refused to leave. (All US citizens had refused to leave the Capitol Building?)

*After:* Near the Capitol Building, demolition crews have finally removed an old **house**, **whose** owners had previously refused to leave.

### Meet Me at the Colon

Commas aren't the only sites for reunions. Proximity breeds readability at another punctuation mark: the colon. This double-dot symbol—this skinny equal sign—works best when it serves, in fact, as an equal sign, a meeting place for equivalent items. The word touching the colon on the left ideally matches whatever touches it on the right.

Take the following two sentences. The only difference between them is word position.

*Before:* Sal skimmed these **bestsellers** while at the library:  
**Unbroken, Freedom, and Words Fail Me.**

*After:* While at the library, Sal skimmed these **bestsellers**:  
**Unbroken, Freedom, and Words Fail Me.**

No one would misread that *before* sentence. You could get away with it. But the second sentence floats straight into your mind. The

words snuggled up against the colon on the right (the book titles) follow directly from the word (*bestsellers*) on the left.

In the revisions below, notice again the difference that word position makes. Further edits would improve some of these sentences even more, but we'll stop here. We're focusing on the improvement that comes from bringing related words together.

*Before:* There are three **choices** in this life: **be good, get good, or give up.** (Dr. House, *House, M.D.*)

*After:* In this life, there are three **choices: be good, get good, or give up.**

*Before:* These are the four most beautiful **words** in our common language: **I told you so.** (attributed to Gore Vidal)

*After:* In our common language, these are the four most beautiful **words: I told you so.**

*Before:* I like to knit with **yarns** that feel soft: **mohair, silk, and—softest of all—bamboo.**

*After:* I like to knit with soft **yarns: mohair, silk, and—softest of all—bamboo.**

### Meet Me at the Period (or Semicolon or Dash)

Where else could want-to-be-adjacents get together? At a period, where two sentences meet. The following example hooks up a pronoun (*it*) with its antecedent—the word that the *it* refers back to (*pizza box*)—at a period.

*Before:* Frank picked up a discarded **pizza box**. The party had gone on for hours, and he was tired. He wanted to hit the sack. But **it** had made the apartment look messy. (The sack had made the apartment look messy?)

*After:* The party had gone on for hours, and Frank was tired. He wanted to hit the sack. But he picked up a discarded **pizza box**. **It** had made the apartment look messy.

This trick also applies to independent clauses that *could* meet at a period but that you prefer to have meet, instead, at a semicolon or dash.

Frank picked up the discarded **pizza box**; it had made the apartment look messy.

Frank picked up the discarded **pizza box**—it had made the apartment look messy.

### Meet Me at the Verb

To get a subject sidled up to its verb, nudge the intervening words out of the way. Hyphens (compound modifiers) and apostrophes (possessive case) can help.

*Before:* The **plan** for doing the marketing via the website **is coming** together.

*After:* The website-marketing **plan is coming** together.

*Before:* The **foundation** of the old house **cracked**.

*After:* The old house's **foundation cracked**.<sup>115</sup>

### Meet Me at the End

Want your words to reach out and touch people? Get the right words to touch each other. When do you stop sliding words around? When you hit your deadline. Or when every last word has found its place.

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115. Some “old line” authorities avoid adding *'s* to inanimate objects. They would keep *house* as an object of a preposition—*the foundation of the house*—rather than use the possessive—*the house's foundation*. This objection is waning. Most English speakers, like Bryan Garner, would find a house's ability to possess a foundation “generally unobjectionable” (Garner, *Garner's Modern American Usage*, 646).