

Shifts

Maintain a consistent point of view as an aid to coherence.

Sudden and illogical shifts in point of view tend to obscure the meaning and thus to cause needless difficulty in reading.

Avoid needless shifts in tense.

SHIFT The boy *closed* his book and *hurries* away to the playground.
[A shift from past tense to present tense]

BETTER The boy *closed* his book and *hurried* away to the playground.
[Both verbs in the past tense]

Note: When the historical present is used, as in summarizing plots of narratives, care will be needed to avoid slipping from the present tense into the past tense.

Romeo *goes* in disguise to a Capulet feast, *falls* in love with Juliet,
and *marries* (not *married*) her secretly.

Avoid needless shifts in mood.

SHIFT First *rise* to your feet and then you *should address* the chairman.
[A shift from imperative to indicative mood]

BETTER First *rise* to your feet and then *address* the chairman.
[Both verbs in the imperative mood]

Avoid needless shifts in subject or voice.

A shift in subject often involves a shift in voice. A shift in voice nearly always involves a shift in subject.

SHIFT James liked fishing, but hunting was also enjoyed by him.
[The subject shifts from *James* to *hunting*. The voice shifts from active to passive.]

BETTER James liked fishing, but he also enjoyed hunting.
[The subject does not shift. Both verbs active]

SHIFT Mary took summer courses and her leisure hours were devoted to tennis. [The subject shifts from *Mary* to *hours*. The voice shifts from active to passive.]

- BETTER Mary took summer courses and devoted her leisure hours to tennis. [One subject only. Both verbs active]
- SHIFT Paul hurried up the mountain path, and soon the laurel came into his sight. [The subject shifts from *Paul* to *laurel*.]
- BETTER Paul hurried up the mountain path and soon caught sight of the laurel. [One subject only]

Avoid needless shifts in person.

- SHIFT *We* have reached a point where *one* ought to face the possibility of a great and sudden change. [A shift from first to third person]
- BETTER *We* have reached a point where *we* ought to face the possibility of a great and sudden change.
- SHIFT *Students* will find the University Book Shop a great convenience. *You* need not leave the campus to purchase any school supplies *you* may need. [A shift from third to second person]
- BETTER *The student* will find the University Book Shop a great convenience. *He* need not leave the campus to purchase any school supplies *he* may need.

Avoid needless shifts in number.

- SHIFT A *person* should be thoughtful of *their* neighbors. [A shift from singular *person* to plural *their*]
- BETTER A *person* should be thoughtful of *his* neighbors.
- SHIFT The United Nations *deserves* encouragement. Indeed *they deserve* much more than that. [If *United Nations* takes a singular verb (*deserves*), it should not be referred to by a plural pronoun (*they*).
- BETTER The United Nations *deserves* encouragement. Indeed, it *deserves* much more than that.

Avoid needless shifts from indirect to direct discourse.

- SHIFT My friend asked whether I knew the coach and will he be with the team. [Mixed indirect and direct discourse]
- BETTER My friend asked whether I knew the coach and whether he would be with the team. [Indirect discourse]
- BETTER My friend asked, “Do you know the coach? Will he be with the team?” [Direct discourse]

Maintain the same tone or style throughout the sentence.

- INAPPROPRIATE Analysis of the principal obstacles to harmony in the United Nations reveals that Russia and her satellites refuse to *play ball* with the rest of the world. [A shift from formal to colloquial style. Substitute *cooperate*, or a similar word, for the italicized expression.]
- INAPPROPRIATE After distributing the grass seed evenly over the lawn, rake the ground at least twice and then *gently bedew it* with fine spray. [The italicized expression is too “poetic” in a sentence with prosaic purpose. Substitute *water it lightly*.]
- INAPPROPRIATE It seemed to Juliet, as she gazed down from the balcony, that Romeo’s face was as white as *the underside of a fish*. [The italicized expression clashes with the romantic beginning of the sentence.]

Maintain a consistent perspective throughout the sentence (and also throughout the larger elements of the discourse).

- FAULTY PERSPECTIVE From the top of the Washington Monument, the government offices seemed to be so many beehives, and the workers droned at their tasks behind long rows of desks. [The perspective shifts from the monument to the interior of government buildings.]
- CONSISTENT PERSPECTIVE From the top of the Washington Monument, the government buildings seemed to be so many beehives, and it was easy to imagine the workers droning at their tasks behind long rows of desks.

⇒ **Exercise:**

Correct in the following sentences all needless shifts in tense, mood, subject, voice, person, number, tone, or perspective. Write **C** after each sentence that needs no revision.

1. According to Helen Leath, Mr. Blake knows how to deal with annoying door-to-door salesmen; they are quickly frightened away by him.
2. Pretending to be a seller of knives, Mr. Blake waves a long butcher knife near the throat of the salesman. You can well imagine what they think.
3. When the policeman gave me a ticket for rolling past a stop sign, I ask him what the fine would be.
4. A woman stepped forward, grabs the culprit by the collar, and demands that he apologize to the child.
5. He said he had a convertible model in stock and would I like to try it out.
6. Jane likes to cook, but house cleaning is not a pleasant occupation.
7. Each person has some distinctive mannerism of their own.
8. When she saw him in the room, she thinks that she is dreaming.
9. If there is little enthusiasm among the students, we might ask, “Why they should be enthusiastic?”
10. No matter what her mother may say, Jane always took the opposite view.
11. It is a book everyone should read, for you can derive much good from it.
12. Gentlemen, we have finished our discussion about balancing the budget; bear with me awhile until I have said a few words about budgeting the balance.
13. The foreign ministers held their conference in Paris, and contrary to rumors, the peace pipe is passed around.
14. Pick the roses in the morning, and then they should be placed in water.
15. A vacation is enjoyed by all because it refreshes the mind and the body.
16. He told his aunt that there is someone in the room.
17. Every citizen should do his duty as they see it.
18. Aunt Jane spent her summers in Wisconsin, but Arizona is her favorite winter climate.
19. Jim wondered whether Jack had left and did he say when he would return?
20. Standing before the house, he thought of the many happy years he had spent there and how quickly they are passing.