Unnecessary Shifts in sentences

Consistency in sentences is kept by using one subject, one tense, and one voice. The mood, the person and the number in pronouns are also important. Unnecessary shifts should be avoided. Shifts commonly occur between the following:

Types of Shifts

1. Subject and voice

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| Typical error: | When Olga was travelling in Europe, a lot of her time was spent standing in line-ups, waiting to buy tickets. (The subject of the main clause is not consistent with that of the subordinate clause; also whereas the voice in the subordinate clause is active, the voice in the main clause has shifted to the passive voice.) |
| Correct: | When Olga was travelling in Europe, she spent a lot of her time standing in line-ups, waiting to buy tickets. (The subordinate clause is in the active voice and Olga is the subject. The same voice and subject are used in the main clause.) |
| Typical error: | As David neared the door, the tinkle of Lavinia’s joyful little laugh could be heard. |
| Correct: | As David neared the door, he heard the tinkle of Lavinia’s joyful little laugh. |
| Typical error: | If you are considering a holiday in Mexico this year, Maddison’s book about the country is required reading. |
| Correct: | If you are considering a holiday in Mexico this year, you must read Maddison’s book about the country. |
| Typical error: | Although evidence was produced, they rejected it as inadmissable. |
| Correct: | Although evidence was produced, it was rejected as inadmissable. |

1. Person or number

Shifts in number in a sentence may also be called errors in pronoun reference. Shifts in number are clearly pronoun reference errors when they occur from sentence to sentence in a paragraph.

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| Typical error: | When a person is laid off, they go into a state of shock initially. (The sentence shifts from third person singular, person, to third person plural, they.) |
| Correct: | When a person is laid off, he or she goes into a state of shock initially. (He or she is consistent in person with a person.) |
| Typical error: | If a person doesn’t look after themselves, they’ve no right to extra service from the Health Care system. (Shift from third person singular person to third person plural they.) |
| Correct: | If people don’t look after themselves, they’ve no right to extra service from the Health Care system. |
| Typical error: | Charlie likes to holiday in remote places where you don’t see another person for days on end. (Shift from first person singular to second person singular.) |
| Correct: | Charlie likes to holiday in remote places where he doesn’t see another person for days on end. |
| Typical error: | I often have half a grapefruit for breakfast for they are so refreshing. (Half a grapefruit is singular, they are is plural.) |
| Correct: | I often have half a grapefruit for breakfast for it is so refreshing. |
| Typical error: | Because they give him indigestion, George didn’t order the fish. (Fish is singular, they is plural.) |
| Correct: | Because fish gives him indigestion, George didn’t order it. |
| Typical error: | The police were called in because everyone had had their cars stolen. They came to the hall, parked, and went in. (Who came to the hall, the guests or the police? This example illustrates the problem caused by the treatment of indefinite pronouns as plural.) |
| Correct: | The police were called in because all the guests had had their cars stolen. The guests had come to the hall, parked, and gone in not twenty minutes before. |
|   | Or |
|   | The police were called in because everyone had had his or her car stolen. They came to the hall, parked, and went in. (Now it is clear that they refers to police.) |

1. Tense
Change tense only when the meaning or the grammar requires such a change.

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| Typical error: | He picked up his mail and starts to say something, but then leaves without a word. |
| Correct: | He picked up his mail and started to say something, but then left without a word. |
| Typical error: | Laura was playing happily with her doll one minute, and in the next, she is throwing herself on to the floor, screaming. |
| Correct: | Laura was playing happily with her doll one minute, and in the next, she was throwing herself on to the floor, screaming. |
| Typical error: | In a panic, I grabbed the gun and dash to the door. |
| Correct: | In a panic, I grabbed the gun and dashed to the door. |
| Typical error: | When Jude asked Alice whether she had liked the film, she said she didn’t. |
| Correct: | When Jude asked Alice whether she had liked the film, she said she hadn’t. |

1. Moods
Mood shifts are common in prose, that is, in paragraphs or other long texts. In particular, be careful to shift from indicative to imperative mood when describing a process or giving instructions. In general, mood should be kept consistent with a context unless this context dictates otherwise.

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| Typical error: | If I had the money, I want to buy a truck. (Shift from subjunctive to indicative) |
| Correct: | If I had the money, I would buy a truck. |
| Typical error: | Enter your log-in, press enter, then you have to type in your password. (Shift from the imperative to the indicative) |
| Correct: | Enter your log-in, press enter, then type in your password. |
| Typical error: | The manager recommends that she takes early retirement. (The that-clause requires the present subjunctive.) |
| Correct: | The manager recommends that she take early retirement. |
| Typical error: | When you are making bread, the first step is to proof” the yeast (to dissolve it in lukewarm water to make sure it’s alive and working). At the same time, the fat should be melted in very hot liquid. When the yeast has risen a little, cool the liquid to lukewarm and add the yeast mixture. |
| Correct: | When you are making bread, the first step is to “proof” the yeast (to dissolve it in lukewarm water to make sure it’s alive and working). At the same time, the fat should be melted in very hot liquid. When the yeast has risen a little, the fat/liquid mixture should be cooled to lukewarm and the yeast mixture added. (Describing a process is not the same as giving instructions—imperative mood. In the incorrect example, the paragraph shifts to imperative in the last sentence.) |

1. Indirect and direct speech

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| Typical error: | An idiot approached me and asked if I knew Colonel Johnson and can I direct her to his house. |
| Correct: | An idiot approached me and asked if I knew a Colonel Johnson and whether I could direct her to his house. (indirect/reported speech) |
| Typical error: | Barry wondered whether she had left a note and what should I do if she hasn’t. (Shift from indirect speech to direct speech) |
| Correct: | Barry wondered whether she had left a note and what he should do if she hadn’t. (indirect/reported speech)OrBarry wondered, “Has she left a note? What should I do if she hasn’t?” (direct speech) |