

awk

# AVOIDING AWKWARD SENTENCES

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## What does “awk” even mean?

Maybe you have received a graded paper from a teacher and professor with **awk** in the margins, and thought *what does that mean?* I don’t blame you. Part of the problem is that **awk** is a general criticism, not a well-defined concept (although it’s a notation teachers and professors often use). Typically it means that something was “off” about your sentence or phrase: perhaps it was a little clumsy, or perhaps it was a little confusing. **Something wasn’t quite right.**

But the sentence probably felt okay to you, otherwise you wouldn’t have written it—right? Or even if you felt like something was “off” about the sentence, you couldn’t find a way to fix it. Awkward sentences are often sentences that “get away from you”—maybe you can tell something was wrong, but can’t figure out why.

So if you hardly know what *awk* means, and you don’t know how to fix an awkward sentence, how can you avoid writing an awkward sentence?

## Finding Awkward Sentences

The first step is *finding* an awkward sentence. The three sentences below were all marked by professors or teachers as *awk*—let’s see if we can figure out why.

- 1) As far as I’m concerned, because of the fact that a situation of discrimination continues in the field of medicine, women have not at the present time achieved quality with men.
- 2) The best teachers help each student become a better student both academically and emotionally.
- 3) College students have a lot of pressure on them being high achievers.

Do these sentences “sound right” to you? Try reading them aloud and see if your opinion of the sentence changes. When we read these three awkward sentences aloud, something sounds “off” about each one of them.

### ***Reading your writing aloud is the best way to find awkward sentences.***

An awkward sentence may not be grammatically incorrect, and you can usually understand what the writer is trying to say—but still, there’s something not quite right, which **your ear can pick up better than your eye.**

You know there’s something wrong with these sentences, and you may even know what it is — but it is sometimes difficult to come up with a solution for a sentence that has “got away.”

## Fixing Awkward Sentences

Let's look at each of the three example sentences, identify the problem with each of them, and give that problem a name.

- 1) As far as I'm concerned, because of the fact that a situation of discrimination continues in the field of medicine, women have not at the present time achieved quality with men.

This sentence was marked *awk* because it is **WORDY**. There are too many unnecessary words and phrases ("wordy words") in the sentence (all of them are underlined). Phrases like "as far as I'm concerned" (or "all things considered" or "last but not least") clutter your writing and make it confusing and *awkward*. By writing the sentence more concisely, we can make it smoother:

Because of continuing discrimination in medicine, women have not yet achieved equality with men.

Here's the second sentence:

- 2) The best teachers help each student to become a better student both academically and emotionally.

This sentence was marked *awk* because it is **REPETITIVE**. The word "student" is repeated twice. Replacing it with a different word will make it less awkward:

The best teachers help each student to grow both academically and emotionally.

Now the third sentence:

- 3) College students have a lot of pressure on them being high achievers.

This sentence was marked *awk* because it has a **DANGLING MODIFIER**. A dangling modifier is a grammatical term for a phrase in a sentence that does not clearly connect to a specific part of the sentence, and is unclear as a result. In this example, we are not sure whether college students *are* high achievers and therefore have lots of pressure on them—or whether they have pressure on them *to be* high achievers. Do you see the difference? Try this instead:

Being high achievers, college students have a lot of pressure on them.

## Avoiding Awkward Sentences

Now that we have looked at some awkward sentences and determined what is wrong with them, how can we be sure to avoid them?

- 1) **read aloud!** – if a sentence doesn't *sound right* to you, then it probably isn't
- 2) **eliminate words!** – be on the look out for "*wordy words*" or *repetition* in your writing
- 3) **slow down!** – *work on a hard sentence slowly*; if you feel like it's "getting away from you," stop, take a moment, and figure out exactly what you're trying to say before you start writing

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