

Meeting 4: Usage and Style

Liane Jeschull

Usage and Style

- **Issues**
 - The Passive: How and when to use it or not to use it
 - Parallelism: How to write better two-item and multiple-item lists
 - Dangling Modifiers: What they are and how to avoid them
 - Other: Pronoun-antecedent agreement and more on simplicity, brevity, and clarity

The Passive

How and when to use it or not to use it

- Think of audience and purpose.

Technical Writing (e.g. Reports)

- frequently uses Passive Voice > focus on the project
- The new bridge **was designed** (by Green) in accordance with latest MassDOT standards.
- The new bridge **is being designed** (by Green) in accordance with latest MassDOT standards.

Marketing (e.g. Proposals)

- Active Voice is preferred > focus on Green's role
- Green **designed** the new bridge and **coordinated** closely with the client throughout the design process.
- Green **is designing** the new bridge and **coordinating** closely with the client throughout the design process.

The Passive

How and when to use it or not to use it

- Use it when the agent is unknown or unimportant.
 - The existing bridge **is located** 0.75 miles southeast of Route 9. It **was** originally **constructed** circa 1870 and **reconstructed** in 1927.
 - Test borings **will be advanced** to at least 15 feet below the existing pipe invert. Boreholes **will be backfilled**. Groundwater level measurements **will be collected** at the time of drilling.

- Use it to emphasize a particular aspect.
 - The project was recently **completed**.
 - The project was designed **by Green**.

The Passive

When to use the Passive with *by*-phrase

by + non-human agents

- default use with certain non-action verbs to describe a situation or state
- The existing roadway **is abutted** by environmentally and culturally sensitive features such as wetlands, matured trees, public conservation land access, agricultural areas and stone walls, all under the jurisdiction of the Town Conservation Commission or Planning Board.
- The work under this project **was funded** in part by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection under the State Revolving Fund provided by the Massachusetts Water Pollution Abatement Trust and by the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority.

The Passive

When to use the Passive with *by*-phrase

by + human agents

- usually just used for contrastive focus on the agent of an action
- Green was the Prime Consultant for the design of the new recreational facility and provided overall project management, civil design, landscape architecture, and construction administration services for the project; the design of the turf fields **was provided** by a subconsultant.
- The field program **will be conducted** by a driller subcontracted by the project team and **overseen** by staff experienced in working with BWSC and executing complex field drilling programs within an urban setting.
- At the completion of the field program, each test boring location **will be field-located** by a Licensed Land Surveyor.

The Passive

Examples of specific uses and potential pitfalls

- An improvement plan was developed and endorsed by the community.
 - ambiguous
 - Better: An improvement plan was developed **by Green** and endorsed by the community.
 - Even better: **Green developed** an improvement plan, which was endorsed by the community.
- Another nearby community that Green was retained to develop the Tier 2 Complete Streets Prioritization Plan was the Town of Hudson.
 - missing prepositions and awkward
- A Notice to Proceed **was given** to Green in February 2015.
 - awkward word order

The Passive

Examples of specific uses and potential pitfalls: project description

- Green was retained by the Town of Littleton to develop the Tier 2 Complete Streets Prioritization Plan as part of the MassDOT program. Another nearby community that Green was retained to develop the Tier 2 Complete Streets Prioritization Plan was the Town of Hudson. Our systematic approach to developing the Plan was applied.

The Passive

Examples of specific uses and potential pitfalls: project description

- The project was on a fast pace schedule. A Notice to Proceed was given to Green in February 2015. Green completed survey, design, and construction documents by April/May 2015. Construction was completed in July/August 2016.

The Passive

Examples of specific uses and potential pitfalls: Scope of Work

- Based on the findings of the preliminary review, a proposed geotechnical field program will be prepared. In accordance with the RFP, the project team will conduct at least one test boring at each proposed pipe replacement site. Based on the proposed pipe replacement locations, we estimate approximately 36 test borings will be conducted at the proposed pipe replacement sites.

The Passive

Examples of specific uses and potential pitfalls: Scope of Work

- The progress of the field program and a review of the data collected will be conducted by the project team during the field work activities. Modifications to the field program will be made based on interim results. Test boring logs, recording the subsurface conditions encountered, drilling methods, and samples collected, will be prepared by the project team. ...

The Passive: Summary

Remember:

- Technical writing frequently uses the Passive Voice to focus on the work, rather than the agent.
- The Passive Voice can be effectively used to emphasize a particular aspect.
- Be careful not to overuse the Passive and to use it correctly.

Parallelism

How to write better two-item and multiple-item lists

➤ Parallelism = Coordination

| Coordination | 2 items | 3 or more items |
|------------------------------|--|---------------------------|
| Words or word groups/phrases | X and Y X or Y X but Y X as well as Y | X, Y, and Z X, Y, or Z |
| Clauses/sentences | X, and Y X, or Y X, but Y | X, Y, and Z X, Y, or Z |

➤ **Rule: Balance parallel ideas. = All items in a list must be of the same type.**

Parallelism

Rule: Balance parallel ideas. = All items in a list must be of the same type.

- Noun (Phrase) + Noun (Phrase)
- *to*-Verb (Phrase) + *to*-Verb (Phrase)
- *-ing*-Verb (Phrase) + *-ing*-Verb (Phrase)
- Prepositional Phrase + Prepositional Phrase

Parallelism

Do not combine *-ing-verb* phrases with noun phrases.

- Use *-ing-verb* phrases and *-ed-verb* phrases when focusing on actions.
 - Use noun phrases to focus on results.
- Green [**completed** field survey], [**design**] and [**prepared** construction documents.]
 - Better: Green **completed** field survey, **performed** design, and **prepared** construction documents.
 - Our construction administration services include [submittal **reviews**], [**reviewing and responding** to Contractor requests for information], [**evaluation** of change order requests], [**review and approval** of requisitions for payment for lump sum or unit bid price contracts] and [**providing** part-time field observations].
 - Better: ... **reviewing** submittals, ..., **evaluating** change order requests, **reviewing and approving** requisitions for payment ..., and ...

Parallelism

Do not combine *-ing*-verb phrases with noun phrases.

- Use *-ing*-verb phrases and *-ed*-verb phrases when focusing on actions.
- Use noun phrases to focus on results.

Useful action verbs:

- performing, preparing, completing, assisting, supporting, conducting (a study/research)
- performed, prepared, completed, assisted, supported, conducted (a study/research)

Parallelism

Only coordinate verb phrases of the same type.

- The proposed test boring locations will be selected [**to avoid** existing utilities], [**to confirm** the findings of previous investigations], and [**to collect** soil samples to evaluate the subsurface conditions at the sites].
- The proposed test boring locations will be selected to [**avoid** existing utilities], [**confirm** the findings of previous investigations], and [**collect** soil samples to evaluate the subsurface conditions at the sites].
- If impacted soils are encountered during drilling, [work at the particular location **will be stopped**], [the borehole **secured**], and [the Commission **will be notified** of the findings].
 - ... [work at the particular location **will be stopped**], [the borehole **will be secured**], and [the Commission **will be notified** of the findings].
 - ... [work at the particular location **will be stopped**], [the borehole **secured**], and [the Commission **notified** of the findings].

Parallelism

Only coordinate noun phrases of the same type.

- The plan includes [several upgraded or new traffic signals with better pedestrian controls], [a roundabout], [sidewalks along each side], [improved transit accommodations], [the start of an off-road multi-use path in one section of the corridor], [**streetscape** and **landscaping**] and [an enhanced pedestrian crossing at the trail connection].
 - ... streetscape and landscape improvements/enhancements (or design)...
- The bikeway consists of a 10-foot bituminous concrete pavement and 2-foot crushed stone shoulders that accommodate [**bicyclists**], [**runners**], [**walkers**], [**rollerbladers**], and [wheelchair **accessibility**].
 - ... [**accommodate** bicyclists, runners, walkers, **and** rollerbladers] and [**provide** wheelchair accessibility].

Parallelism

Only coordinate noun phrases of the same type.

- Green was responsible for the [site utility **design**], [driveway and sidewalk **restoration** within the project limits], and [supplemental **survey** to verify existing conditions].
 - ... site utility **design**, **design** for driveway and sidewalk restoration..., and supplemental **survey**...
- Green also has a dedicated staff of full-time Construction Inspectors and Resident Engineers that provide full-time construction phase services to municipal and State clients for [roadway and bridge reconstruction **projects**], [water main **rehabilitation and replacement**] and [sewer **construction**].
 - ... [roadway and bridge reconstruction ~~projects~~], [water main rehabilitation and replacement], and [sewer construction] **projects**.

Parallelism

Only coordinate noun phrases of the same type.

- The major design elements of the project include [multi use turf field], [two basketball courts], [open green space],[playground], [restrooms], [concessions], [parking], [landscaping], [site lighting], and [a multi-use hard-surfaced path throughout the facility].
 - Use the indefinite article *a/an* with singular count nouns (to indicate quantity).
 - ... [**a** multi use turf field], [**two** basketball courts], [open green space],[**a** playground], [restrooms], [concessions], [parking/**a** parking lot], [landscaping > landscape features such as ...(?)], [site lighting], and [**a** multi-use hard-surfaced path throughout the facility].

Parallelism

Only coordinate noun phrases of the same type.

Embedded noun phrases (noun phrases within noun phrases) are o.k.

- Peer reviews for municipal clients typically consist of review of projects for compliance with [local [zoning and subdivision] **regulations**], [state [wetland and stormwater] **regulations**], and [good **engineering practice**].
- Green was responsible for [[site grading], [drainage], [stormwater management], and [utility] **design**]; [the **design** for bituminous and cement concrete pavements]; and [supplemental **survey** to verify existing conditions].

Parallelism

Only coordinate noun phrases of the same type.

Avoid ambiguity.

- Green's work involved [**research and a compilation of past or ongoing town studies**], [**completing** a community-wide safety analysis] and [**evaluating** the town's major roadways in terms of accommodating pedestrian and bicycle travel].
 - [[**researching**] and [**compiling**] studies]?
 - [**conducting** research to compile studies]?
 - [[**conducting** research] and [**compiling** studies]]?
- The team **will evaluate** potential contaminated soil and groundwater areas by **review** of available documents, including the existing site history information, and **identifying** unresolved issues and data gaps.
 - ... **will evaluate** areas by [**reviewing** available documents...] and [**identifying** issues and gaps ...]?
 - ... **will** [**evaluate** areas [by **review** of available documents...]] and [**identify** issues and gaps ...]?

Parallelism

How to write better two-item and multiple-item lists

| Coordination | 2 items | 3 or more items |
|------------------------------|--|---------------------------|
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- ✓ **Rule: Balance parallel ideas. = All items in a list must be of the same type.**
- **Additional Rule: The conjunctions *as well as*, *both ... and ...*, *either ... or ...*, and *neither ... nor ...* form two-item lists (pairs); hence, there should be no comma before *as well as* (unless *as well as* is preceded by a non-restrictive element, i.e. a comma is needed for independent reasons).**

Parallelism

- The team **will observe** field conditions for each of the pipe lining locations listed in the Scope of Work (totaling 15,580 linear feet) as well as **reviewing** all 26,405 linear feet of CCTV recordings provided by BWSC.
 - The two items must be of the same type.
 - Better: The team **will observe** field conditions ... as well as **review** ... CCTV recordings...
 - Compare: The team **will observe** field conditions ... *and* **review** ... CCTV recordings...
- Green was responsible for the civil/site design for the project, including [stormwater **management**], as well as [[water system] and [sewer system] **designs**].
 - No comma!
 - Compare: ... [stormwater **management**] *and* [[water system] and [sewer system] **designs**]

Parallelism

- For more than 60 years, Green has been providing sound hydraulic engineering services for [[**culverts**] and [**bridges** over waterways]], as well as [[stormwater] and [floodplain] **management**].
 - No comma before *as well as*!
 - Compare: ... sound hydraulic engineering services for [**culverts** and **bridges** over waterways] *and* [stormwater and floodplain **management**]
- Green can provide landscape architectural services associated [**with** [roadway], [bikeway], [bridge], [urban streetscape] and [building] **projects**], as well as [**with the design** of [parks], [playgrounds] and [recreational facilities]], resulting in visually attractive and environmentally functional designs.
 - Comma before *and*.
 - No comma before *as well as*.

Parallelism

Exceptions:

- Mr. Engineer was responsible for [preparing and entering of detailed engineer's cost estimates for each contract area, *including a breakdown of items eligible for I&I funding,*] as well as [overseeing and coordinating the preparation of the record plans].
 - Non-restrictive phrase *including ...* is separated from the rest of the sentence by commas.
- Green's work included [emergency sewer repairs in Lynn, MA,] as well as [QA/QC review for studies and reports [on wastewater overflows in Braintree, MA,] and [on new cured-in-place repair lining techniques]].
 - The abbreviation MA is separated from the remainder of the sentence by commas.

Parallelism: Summary

Remember:

To write better two-item and multiple-item lists

- Balance parallel ideas. = All items in a list must be of the same type.
- Do not use a comma before *as well as* because the conjunctions *as well as*, *both ... and ...*, *either ... or ...*, and *neither ... nor ...* form two-item lists (pairs).

Dangling Modifiers

What they are and how to avoid them

Modifiers:

- words (e.g. adverbs and *not*)
- phrases
- clauses

3 canonical sentence positions for modifiers:

- at the beginning of a sentence:
To date, Green has completed ten assignments under the contract.
- at the end of a sentence:
Green has completed ten assignments **to date**.
- between Subject and Verb:
Green is **currently** working on the eleventh assignment.

Dangling Modifiers

What they are and how to avoid them

2 Problems:

- Awkwardly placed modifier:
 - **All** items are **not** available in some stores.
 - Better: **Not all** items are available in some stores.
- Dangling modifier:
 - **When growing up**, my mom would always cook my favorite food for me.
 - When I grew up, my mom would always cook my favorite food for me.

Dangling Modifiers

Problem 1: Awkwardly placed modifiers

- **Place limiting modifiers next to what they actually modify.**
- The existing sewers and drains are on average 15 feet and 10 feet below ground surface, **respectively**.
 - Better: The existing sewers and drains are on average 15 feet and 10 feet, **respectively**, below ground surface.

Dangling Modifiers

Problem 1: Awkwardly placed modifiers

- **Try to avoid lengthy modifiers between Subject and Verb. Place them at the beginning or the end of the sentence.**
- Green, **as a subconsultant to ABC Engineers**, provided Civil, Structural, and Survey services for this project.
 - **As a subconsultant to ABC Engineers**, Green provided Civil, Structural, and Survey services for this project.
 - Green provided Civil, Structural, and Survey services for this project **as a subconsultant to ABC Engineers**.
- Green was responsible for all civil design and landscape architecture services for the project. Green provided these services **as a subconsultant to XYZ Architects/ as a prime consultant to the Town of Littleton**.
 - This focuses on being a subconsultant or prime consultant, rather than on the work.

Dangling Modifiers

Problem 1: Awkwardly placed modifiers

- **Be careful with the phrase *in order to ...* It usually refers back to the Subject of a sentence.**
- **MassDOT** understands that it is difficult to meaningfully apply the economic impact criteria that were established and needs a robust methodology **in order to be defensible, transparent, and data-driven.**
 - **MassDOT** understands that it is difficult to meaningfully apply the economic impact criteria that were established and needs a robust methodology **in order [for MassDOT?/for the criteria?] to be defensible, transparent, and data-driven.**

Dangling Modifiers

Problem 1: Awkwardly placed modifiers

- **Splitting *to*-infinitives is o.k.**
- Other major design features included a new sub-drain system and closed drainage system along the entire length of the roadway to eliminate the frost reaction underneath the pavement, (to) **efficiently and safely** remove stormwater runoff, and (to) prevent ice build-up on the roadway.
- Compare: ... to remove stormwater runoff **efficiently and safely**
 - This focuses on the modifier (how?), rather than on removing stormwater runoff.

Dangling Modifiers

Problem 2: Real dangling modifiers

- **After submitting the 90% Design**, MWRA separated the Contract into three Construction Packages.
 - MWRA submitted the 90% Design? To whom?
 - Better: After **Green** submitted the 90% Design, **MWRA** separated the Contract into three Construction Packages.
- Per the RFP, BWSC will provide all necessary permits for work on public property prior to **implementing** the geotechnical field program, including permits required by the City of Boston, MWRA, MassDOT, and DCR, and other applicable agencies or property owners.
 - BWSC implementing the field program?
 - Better: BWSC will provide all necessary permits... before **we** implement.../ before **the team** implements.../ before the field program is implemented ...

Dangling Modifiers

Problem 2: Real dangling modifiers

- **Be careful with the passive.**
- In addition to **assisting** the Town in securing the grant, our systematic approach to developing the plan was applied.
 - Who assisted the Town?
 - Better: In addition to **assisting** the Town in securing the grant, **we** applied our systematic approach to developing the plan.
- **Working with** the team's urban designers and planners, an improvement plan was developed.
 - The community developed the plan and worked with the design team?
 - Better: **Working with** the team's urban designers and planners, **Green** developed an improvement plan, which was endorsed by **the community**.

Dangling Modifiers

Problem 2: Real dangling modifiers

- **Be careful with *there is/there are*.**
- Over the past 10 years, **there** has been a notable increase in emphasis on Complete Streets, **building on** previous concepts of traffic calming, safe routes to school and context-sensitive principles to name a few.
 - Who is building on previous concepts.
- **Be careful with *if Verb-ed* clauses.**
- Boreholes, including vacuum excavation holes **if conducted**, will be backfilled with soil cuttings and asphalt patched (cold patch) at the completion of the work and in accordance with City of Boston requirements.
 - What is conducted?

Dangling Modifiers: Summary

Remember:

To avoid dangling (and awkwardly placed) modifiers

- Place modifiers in such a way that it is clear what they actually modify and what you want to emphasize.
- Make sure that *-ing* and *-ed* phrases have a clear reference (Subject).

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

- **Green** provides comprehensive engineering services through **our** four Engineering Groups.
 - **Green** provides a full suite of construction phase services to **our** clients.
 - **Green** will summarize **our** analysis and recommendations for inclusion in the Preliminary Scope Assessment Memo.
- Not within the same sentence.

But:

- **Green** has extensive experience performing peer review services for municipalities. Of particular note is **our** substantial body of prior and current work with the Town of Littleton.

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

- Green assisted **RIDOT** in updating **their** design manuals.
- The Town of Littleton recommended us to the **Town of Ayer** when **they were** looking for a firm to review a proposed site plan, which Green completed in 2015.
- Our project team consists of Green, ABC Engineers, and XYZ Engineers. ABC Engineers is a civil, environmental, and geotechnical engineering firm with more than 40 years of experience. **They specialize** in Subsurface Utility Engineering.
- Treat agencies and institutions as being grammatically 3rd person singular.

But:

- Green's Water Resources Engineering Group has effectively helped **numerous municipalities, regional authorities, state and federal agencies, and private clients** with **their** flood-related design challenges.
- In addition to **their** efforts at work, **Green's environmental staff** are reliable participants in regional engineering organizations, where **they** assist in reviewing draft environmental regulations and assembling comments on these draft materials.

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

- In the Request for Proposals (RFP), **it** states that...
 - Better: The Request for Proposals (RFP) states that...
- In MassDOT's *Project Development & Design Guide*, **they** provide several guiding principles for designing transportation improvement projects.
 - In **its** *Project Development & Design Guide*, **MassDOT** provides several guiding principles for designing transportation improvement projects.
 - MassDOT's *Project Development & Design Guide* provides several guiding principles for designing transportation improvement projects

More on Simplicity, Brevity, and Clarity

Clarity

- When using abbreviations, first introduce the term with the abbreviation in parenthesis.
- The project involved the design of the reconstruction of Main Street, drainage improvements, street and park lighting, tree planting, installation of brick and concrete sidewalks, curbing, utility line relocation, signage and pavement markings, surveying services including base plan preparation and **PIC plans**. (?)
- Required permits included a **Notice of Intent (NOI)** from the local conservation commission; a **Water Quality Certificate (WQC)** and Ch. 91 license from Massachusetts DEP; an 8M permit from MWRA as a portion of the project went over one of the water mains; a 404 Army Corp **Pre-Construction Notification (PCN)** permit; **Coastal Zone Management (CZM)** consistency approval; and approval from the US Coast Guard. ...

More on Simplicity, Brevity, and Clarity

Clarity

- Avoid jargon.
- Our team will identify any locations where further CCTV inspection by BWSC should be considered due to access locations, continuity, **etc.**
 - If there are more, name them.
- Green is pleased to submit this Proposal in response to the Request for Proposals (RFP) for **the above referenced project.**
 - Spell out the name of the project.

More on Simplicity, Brevity, and Clarity

Simplicity and Brevity

- Use verbs for nouns to avoid wordy expressions.
- Juli Riemenschneider, Green's Senior Landscape Architect, **was in attendance** at the unveiling of the Horace Mann statue in the Franklin pocket park she designed as part of the redevelopment of the parcel.
 - ... was in attendance ... > attended
- **It is our current understanding** that the existing sewers and drains are on average 15 feet and 10 feet below ground surface, respectively.
 - ... it is our understanding ... > we understand
- The team **will conduct a review** of existing utility and subsurface documentation within and adjacent to the proposed project sites.
 - ... will conduct a review ... > will review

More on Simplicity, Brevity, and Clarity

Simplicity and Brevity

... *due to* + Noun Phrase/ ... *because of* + Noun Phrase > *because* + clause

... *prior to* + Noun Phrase > *before* + clause

- The roadway pavement was in poor condition, having deteriorated **due to repeated forces from frost action**, and lack of maintenance.
- At both sites, the new lifts with a platform size of 30" x 41.5" required a variance from MAAB **due to existing site constraints that prohibited the new lifts to meet the required 30" x 48" regulation per 521 CMR 21.18.5a.**
- **Due to the geometric offsets and close distance between A Street and B Street**, the traffic signal system was designed such that both intersections would function as a single signalized intersection.
- **Prior to conducting a field exploration program at pipe locations identified to be replaced**, the team will conduct a review of existing utility and subsurface documentation within and adjacent to the proposed project sites.