

Why Trim Sentences?

Spotting Subject-Verb-Disagreement errors is often easier when you “trim” the sentence, that is, eliminate nonessential modifiers to leave the “core” of the sentence. What remains after you “trim” a sentence should still be a grammatically correct and complete sentence.

How to “Trim” a Sentence

Step 1: Cross out all nonessential prepositional phrases.

e.g., *The bird ~~in the cage~~ began singing.*

A **preposition** is a word that shows relative position or direction. It can complete one of the following sentences:

Democracy is government _____ the people.

The squirrel ran _____ the tree.

Examples include: *to, from, of, for, by, in, before, with, beyond, and up.*

A **prepositional phrase** is the preposition and the noun phrase that follows, including its modifiers.

e.g., *the beginning with hat in hand*

from sea to shining sea

Step 2: Cross out all interrupting phrases.

e.g., *The committee, ~~ignoring tradition~~, will approve the measure.*

An **interrupting phrase** is a modifying phrase that interrupts the flow of the sentence. Interrupters are generally separated from the main sentence by commas or dashes.

Step 3: Cross out all other nonessential modifiers and modifying phrases.

e.g., *Having ~~traveled so far~~, the baseball team hardly wanted to forfeit the championship game.*

Modifiers are *adjectives* and *adverbs*, as well as modifying phrases like *participial phrases* (see Lesson 7). Most modifiers are not essential to a sentence, but some are. Use your best judgment. One kind of essential adjective is a *predicate adjective*, that is, an adjective that is linked to the subject by a linking verb, as in *Martha is smart*.

Trimming a sentence helps you to spot SVD more easily.

Original: *My chief concern with this budget and the other proposals on the table are the cuts in school funds.*

Trimmed: *My concern are the cuts.*

Revised: *My concern is the cuts.*

Who Kicked Whom?

When you write, trim your sentences to play the “Who kicked whom?” exercise. Look at the subject-verb-object (“Who kicked whom?”) core, and see if it clearly and forcefully conveys the thought you want to convey.

Original: *The lack of economic programs and no big country's being ready to join it symbolized the problems the League of Nations had in getting established.*

Trimmed: *The lack and no country's being ready symbolized the problems.*

Yikes! That doesn't make a shred of sense; rewrite it.

Revised: *Two problems plagued the establishment of the League of Nations: its lack of viable economic programs and its lack of support from the larger countries.*