

The Dangling “Which” *Are Writers Daring You to Misunderstand?*

By Dianna Booher

You may have noticed a growing trend in rambling prose--that of making a statement and then tacking on a “which” clause that takes off in another direction. For example, one syndicated columnist, who shall remain anonymous to protect the guilty, writes this in his column: “I wasn’t doing anything last month, so I decided to drive across the country to see my aunt, which reminds me that my car needs new tires.”

What reminds him--the country, the aunt, the trip, or the thought of traveling? Let’s go through a process of elimination: The meaning for “which” can’t be the trip or thought because those nouns aren’t in the sentence. “Who” refers to a person--the aunt--so “which” can’t refer to “aunt.” I suppose the writer may have meant that the “country” reminded him--but that’s a long shot. Now when you’re reading this particular columnist, the meaning doesn’t matter all that much. He’s a humorist and anything goes.

But if you intend to be clear, a dangling “which” can get you in trouble. Consider this sentence:

“Miriam was angry about quick installation of the new equipment, which pleased almost everyone else in the office.” (What displeased everyone--the new equipment or the quick installation?)

It’s typically better to end the sentence before the “which” and begin a new sentence: “Miriam was angry about quick installation of the new equipment. But the speedy installation (or the new equipment) pleased almost everyone else in the office.”

Make sure “which” clearly stands for another noun or pronoun in the sentence--not just the complete “idea” of the sentence. Unless you’re a humorist, you can’t afford the miscommunication.

#

289 words

© Dianna Booher, Booher Consultants, Inc. All rights reserved.

*Dianna Booher works with organizations to increase their productivity and effectiveness through better oral, written, interpersonal, and cross-functional communication. She is a keynote speaker and the author of more than 40 books (22 on communication) including The Voice of Authority, Booher's Rules of Business Grammar, Speak with Confidence, and Communicate with Confidence. Dianna is CEO of **Booher Consultants**, a communication training firm offering programs in presentations skills, business writing, and interpersonal communication. Successful Meetings Magazine named her to its list of "21 Top Speakers for the 21st Century." Executive Excellence Publishing also named Dianna to its "Top 100 Thought Leaders" and "Top 100 Minds on Personal Development." www.booher.com or call 800.342.6621.*

For more on business writing, see E-Writing: 21st-Century Tools for Effective Communication (Simon & Schuster/Pocket Books) by Dianna Booher.