

Squad Helps Dog Bite Victim

WRITTEN GRAMMAR AND NEWSPAPER HEADLINES

In order to save space, English language newspaper headlines usually omit all forms of the verb *to be*, definite and indefinite articles, complex tenses, and auxiliary verbs. For example, if a newspaper editor writes a headline for an article that talks about a squad of paramedics who gave medical help to the victim of a dog bite, he or she will remove all the extra words and the end result will be something like “Squad Helps Dog Bite Victim” (which is a real headline that appeared in a real newspaper). Often those extra words can be removed while leaving the meaning perfectly clear.

Occasionally, however, the result can be read two different ways. This is because many English words can function as verbs or nouns or adjectives, and only the auxiliary verbs and articles make clear how they are being used. For instance, in this case, we have a headline “Squad Helps Dog Bite Victim”. We can read this in two ways. In the first, *dog bite victim* is a noun phrase, with *dog* and *bite* functioning as qualifiers of *victim*, and the noun phrase is the object of *helps*. The full sentence would then mean: “A squad has helped the victim of a dog bite.” In the second reading, *dog bite victim* is an embedded sentence, in which *bite* is the verb, and this embedded sentence is the complement of the verb *helps*. In the case, the full sentence would mean: “A squad has helped a dog to bite someone.” As anyone can see, this can sometimes lead to funny results.

The rest of the headlines in this list have double meanings. Some are ambiguous because one word or phrase can function as two different parts of speech. Others may be ambiguous because of poor placement of participial phrases or other reasons. Try to figure out what the two meanings are (write out the full sentences in each case). Then try to rewrite the headline so that it is not ambiguous.

1. NJ Judge to Rule on Nude Beach (NJ=New Jersey, a US state near New York)
2. Victims Say Tree Trimmer Takes Money, Then Leaves
3. Stolen Painting Found by Tree
4. Red Tape Holds up New Bridge
5. Prostitutes Appeal to Pope
6. Complaints about NBA Referees Growing Ugly (NBA=National Basketball Association)
7. Killer Sentenced to Die for Second Time in 10 Years
8. British Left Waffles on Falklands
9. Miners Refuse to Work after Death
10. Utah Girl Does Well in Dog Shows
11. Include Your Children When Baking Cookies
12. Two Sisters Reunited after 18 Years at Checkout Counter

Now consider these statements. They are also ambiguous, but not because of missing information. Instead, they are full and grammatically complete sentences that can be interpreted two different ways because of a poorly placed participial phrase (like 7 and 12 above). Try to figure out what the two meanings are. Then rewrite the sentence so that it is no longer ambiguous. Remember that a well-placed comma can sometimes fix the problem.

Example: I once shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got into my pajamas I'll never know. (Groucho Marx)

1. Two cars were reported stolen by the Groveton police yesterday.
2. Yoko Ono will talk about her husband John Lennon who was killed in an interview with Barbara Walters.
3. We will not sell gasoline to anyone in a glass container.
4. For sale: Mixing bowl set designed to please a cook with round bottom for efficient beating.
5. The license fee for altered dogs with a certificate will be \$3 and for pets owned by senior citizens who have not been altered the fee will be \$1.50.