

Publication of clinical trial results...

number of letters in response to a recent review by Ross and colleagues [5, 6], which evaluated guest authorship and ghost writing in publications related to rofecoxib in a case study of industry documents from rofecoxib litigation. Several researchers challenged claims that they were guest or ghost authors on reviews they have published, and criticised the methods used by Ross and colleagues in their analysis [6]. In reply, Ross rebuts their criticisms and provides further explanation for his conclusions.

In a recent correspondence, Adamson and colleagues discussed ethical medical writing, author accountability, and compensation [8]. They used the example of preparing a clinical trial manuscript to give a detailed analysis of the different individuals involved, their role in the process, and the appropriate way to acknowledge their contribution.

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How successful are we at understanding syntactic ambiguity?

Syntactic ambiguity is a property of sentences that may be reasonably interpreted in more than one way, or reasonably interpreted to mean more than one thing. Ambiguity may or may not involve one word having two parts of speech or homonyms.

Syntactic ambiguity arises not from the range of meanings of single words, but from the relation between the words and clauses of a sentence, and the sentence structure implied thereby. When a reader can reasonably interpret the same sentence as having more than one possible structure, the text is equivocal and meets the definition of syntactic ambiguity. Let's analyse some classic examples:

1. **Visiting friends can be boring.** *Visiting* can be boring although one can leave whenever one wants. In that sense, it is not like '*visiting friends*' who, if they stay too long, can be boring, especially if you are too polite to tell them to leave because it's your bedtime.

Now, let's disambiguate:

| | |
|--|---|
| <i>Friends who visit [others] can be boring.</i> | <i>For one to visit friends can be boring. (i.e. visiting itself is boring)</i> |
| visiting friends = subject | visiting friends = subject |
| visiting friends = noun phrase | visiting friends = noun phrase |
| visiting = pre-modifier | visiting = verb (subject deleted) |
| friends = head noun | friends = object |
| can be = verb phrase | can be = verb phrase |
| boring = complement | boring = complement |

2. **Flying planes can be dangerous.** Either *flying planes is dangerous*, or *flying planes are dangerous*.

3. **Time flies like an arrow.** Although we unambiguously understand it to mean '*Time flies in the same way that an arrow does*', it could also mean:

- measure the speed of flying insects like you would measure that of an arrow (thus interpreted as an imperative), i.e. (You should) time flies as you would (time) an arrow.;
- measure the speed of flying insects like an arrow would (this example is also in the imperative mood), i.e. (You should) time flies in the same way that an arrow would (time them).;
- measure the speed of flying insects that are like arrows, i.e. Time those flies that are like arrows;
- all of a type of flying insect, 'time-flies', collectively enjoy a single arrow (compare '*Fruit flies like a banana*');;
- each of a type of flying insect, '*time-flies*', individually enjoys a different arrow (similar comparison applies);

As Groucho Marx is said to have observed, '*Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana*'.

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