

Drafting notes 1

A newspaper cutting recently quoted on BBC radio's *News Quiz* read:

Too many police can't shoot straight or take bribes.

This is a common form of syntactic ambiguity — ambiguity arising from sentence structure. It is caused by the writer's failure to show whether "can't" governs just "shoot straight" or both "shoot straight" and "take bribes". Is the writer complaining that some police take bribes or that they *can't* take bribes? This structure will cause problems where both alternatives are possible.

So how can writers show what they mean? Mathematicians' formulae use brackets, writing something like

(A) Too many police ([can't shoot straight] or [take bribes]).

(B) Too many police can't (shoot straight or take bribes).

Here are some other possibilities:

(A) Too many police either can't shoot straight or take bribes.

(B) Too many police can't either shoot straight or take bribes.

(A) Too many police take bribes or can't shoot straight.

(A) Too many police can't shoot straight or do take bribes.

(A) Too many police can't shoot straight, or take bribes.

(A) Too many police:

can't shoot straight or
take bribes.

(B) Too many police can't:

shoot straight; or
take bribes.

Drafting notes 2

In *Drafting notes 1* I looked at an ambiguity in the sentence:

Too many police can't shoot straight or take bribes.

Another ambiguity arises if the writer meant

Too many police can't ... take bribes.

There is an understandable inclination for the reader to assume that if someone "can't do A or B" *can't* is used in the same sense for both A and B. And this inclination is reflected in the advice that the same word should not be used in different senses, especially in a formal legal document. So this wording suggests that some police are incapable of taking bribes rather than that they are unwilling to do so.

You *might* say that this is not ambiguous because "can't" can *only* mean "is incapable of". But if that were so the sentence wouldn't have been funny.

Drafting notes 3

In speech, ambiguity is often resolved automatically and unconsciously by the pattern of stresses, or by pauses. Say to yourself

John could only see his wife from the doorway

several times, each time stressing a different word, and see how it changes the meaning.

Because this technique is unconscious, the problem is often overlooked in written text. Then both writer and reader will “hear” in their mind’s ear only the stress pattern that the context or their own habits of thought suggest. If these give rise to different meanings they will misunderstand each other.

What can we do about it?

- The pause technique can sometimes be reflected by punctuation, as with the comma after “stresses” in the first sentence of this note. But this should be used carefully: it may lead to over-punctuation; and it will sometimes be too subtle.
- Stress can be shown by bold or italic type, or by underlining, as long as these devices aren’t being used to flag something else.
- The wording can be changed. For example:

John could see only his wife from the doorway.