Making Sense of Confusing Sentences

Sentences that are very long or that contain difficult vocabulary and/or grammatical structure, can be confusing and difficult to understand. Although there is no easy formula to magically clarify these sentences, the following tips will help them make sense.

1. Try to determine what makes the sentence difficult.

   a. **Difficult vocabulary?** If possible, use context clues but know that it may be that the sentence can be understand without knowing the meaning of every word.

      The West had sent armies to capture and hold Jerusalem; instead they themselves fell victim to a host of new ideas and subtle influences which left their mark on the development of European literature, chivalry, warfare, sanitation, commerce, political institutions, medicine and the papacy itself.

   b. **Too long?** Break it up into smaller parts. Pay close attention to pronouns!

      The West had sent armies to capture and hold Jerusalem. The West fell victim to a host of new ideas and subtle influences. These ideas and influences left their mark on the development of European literature, chivalry, warfare, sanitation, commerce, political institutions, medicine and the papacy.

   c. **Specific details?** Omit them to determine the main idea of the sentence. Look for clauses introduced by “which,” “who,” “that,” or “like,” or those set off by commas.

      These ideas, which left their mark on the development of European literature, chivalry, warfare, sanitation, commerce, political institutions, medicine, and the papacy, greatly changed Western culture.

2. Recognize important grammatical and punctuation clues that change the meaning of a sentence.

   a. **Affixes**

      Summery weather is not uncommon.

   b. **Punctuation**

      Barry said, “George has been elected president?”

      Wally “sings” at all of his friends’ parties.
c. Key words that signal relationships

The school has grown **from** a small building holding 200 students **to** a large institution that educates 4,000 students a year.

**From...to** indicates beginning and end points of a period of change.

*Many critics have proclaimed Doris Lessing as **not only** the best writer of the postwar generation, **but also** a penetrating analyst of human affairs.*

**Not only...but also** indicates both parts of the sentence are equally important.

**In order to** graduate on time, you will need to take five courses each semester.

**In order to** is like “if;” it indicates that some event must occur before another can take place.

*The West had sent armies to capture and hold Jerusalem, **instead** they themselves fell victim to new ideas and subtle influences.*

**Instead** indicates that something happened contrary to expectations.

**As a result of** these books, a television documentary, and a special exposition at the Library of Congress, the mystery has aroused considerable public interest.

**As a result of** indicates a cause/effect relationship. The clause that follows “as a result of” is the cause of the event.

**Because of** the impact of their ideas, the West was greatly changed.

**Because of** indicates a cause/effect relationship. What follows “because of” is the cause of the event.