

Existential Crisis

For my course project, I joined the BYU journal *Criterion* as an editor. The journal met once a week to discuss the topic we would be editing for that week. The editing topics we covered were subject editing, substantive editing, grammar, and punctuation. These meetings lasted about 15–20 minutes each except for our final meeting, where we did final edits and uploaded our articles to Adobe InDesign, which lasted several hours. The article I was assigned to edit was a sixteen-page paper titled “Contemporary Existentialism in Two of George Orwell’s Novels.” I was paired with a senior editor, which was very helpful for me as I learned more about the editing process. On average, I spent about forty-five minutes per week working on my edits. Overall, I enjoyed the experience and I feel that I learned a lot about what editing is really like. In this reflection, I will discuss my initial thoughts as I approached the paper, share examples of sentences I edited (which contained errors regarding shift in tense, pronoun reference, passive voice, and subject verb agreement) and conclude with my final thoughts about my project.

At first, I was really nervous because I did not know anything about existentialism or George Orwell. When I did my first read through of the paper, I wasn’t sure if the reason I couldn’t understand anything was that the sentences were unclear or that I had no idea what existentialism actually was. However, I did not give up hope. I talked to my brother (who used to be a member of our high school’s existentialist club) and he recommended a few videos I could watch on YouTube to get a better understanding of the concept. Armed with a greater knowledge of existentialism--and a greater appreciation for scholarly YouTube channels--I looked at the essay again. After I read through it a couple more times, the essay started making a lot more sense, and I felt more confident in my ability to suggest meaningful edits.

The first round of edits we focused on were all about the organization of the paper. For example, several paragraphs lacked clear topic sentences, and the paper itself did not have a concluding paragraph. After this round, we moved on to grammar and usage. Some of the easiest problems for me to find were places where the paper slipped into past tense instead of using literary present tense. An edit that was trickier for me was finding ambiguous pronoun references. Sometimes, I could spot some ambiguous references easily, but trying to figure out how to reword the phrase to be unambiguous was difficult for me. Other times, I was not sure if a pronoun was really ambiguous, or if I was just overcomplicating the phrase. Here is an example sentence I edited that contains both ambiguous pronoun reference and past tense.

Original phrase (past tense bolded, ambiguous pronoun reference underlined):

Felski gets closer with her statement that Gordon's dislike of capitalism **stemmed** from an internalized hierarchy that **caused** him to deprive himself of pleasure that he then **recognized** when he **returned** to suburbia; however, it fails to provide any analysis or insight as to how Gordon truly **broke** free of this hierarchy for the reason that this character development **did not** actually occur.

When I read this phrase, the "it" seems ambiguous to me. Does "it" refer to Gordon's dislike of capitalism? The internalized hierarchy? Felski's statement? In addition, using "this character development" seems unclear because the reader is unsure which character development the phrase is referring to.

Edited phrase:

Felski gets closer with her statement that Gordon's dislike of capitalism **stems** from an internalized hierarchy that **causes** him to deprive himself of pleasure that he then **recognizes** when he **returns** to suburbia; however, the statement fails to provide any

analysis or insight as to how Gordon truly **breaks** free of this hierarchy for the reason that this breaking free **does not** actually occur.

I found another example of ambiguous pronoun reference in this phrase:

Guild offers an interesting analysis of why **Gordon's assimilation into suburbia is beneficial, but one that ultimately falls flat** because of Guild's failure to include analysis regarding the lack of effectiveness with which Gordon rebels, most likely because this would contradict **his statement**.

I feel that the wording of this phrase forces the reader to work hard in order to puzzle out the intended meaning of the phrase. Is Gordon's assimilation into suburbia what falls flat, or is Guild's analysis what ultimately falls flat? Whose statement is being contradicted? Gordon's or Guild's?

Edited phrase:

Guild offers an interesting analysis of why Gordon's assimilation into suburbia is beneficial, **but Guild's argument ultimately falls flat** because of his failure to include analysis regarding the lack of effectiveness with which Gordon rebels, most likely because this would contradict **Guild's thesis**.

Another edit that was easy for me to spot was unnecessary use of passive voice. While oftentimes the use of passive voice was not too distracting, I still felt the sentences flowed better and read easier when rewritten in active voice. I have included one example sentence dealing with passive voice. (This phrase also contains another bonus use of past tense instead of the literary present.)

Original phrase (past tense underlined, passive voice bolded):

Dorothy was acting in bad faith when she turned into the type of teacher **that she was expected to be by the headmistress and the parents**; however, when she was choosing based on her values and experiences what to teach the children, she was not at all in bad faith.

I felt that this use of passive voice was unnecessary and unwieldy, so I suggested rephrasing the sentence without using passive voice. In addition, this phrase also used past tense instead of literary present, so I changed that as well.

Edited phrase:

Dorothy acts in bad faith when she turns into the type of teacher **that the headmistress and the parents expect her to be**. However, when she chooses based on her values and experiences what to teach the children, she does not at all act in bad faith.

Although I did not find many subject/verb agreement problems, I was very proud of the ones I was able to spot. Here is an example sentence with an inverted subject.

Original Sentence (subject/verb agreement bolded, other changes underlined):

There **seems** to be two main areas for further existentialist development after examining current criticisms, and as such, two main areas I'll discuss here: one, Dorothy's relationship with bad faith, and two, Dorothy's interaction with an absurdist world.

At first read, this sentence sounds okay, but it seems a little bit off. I did not notice the subject/verb agreement problem until after we talked about inverted subjects in class. Once I understood that concept, I understood why the sentence does not sound quite right: the subject of the sentence, "two main areas," is plural, but the verb "seems" is singular. I also felt that the "and as such, two main areas I'll discuss here" was unnecessarily wordy, but the author actually changed that herself without my saying anything about it.

Revision:

After examining current criticisms, there **seem** to be two main areas for further existentialist development, which I will discuss here: one, Dorothy's relationship with bad faith, and two, Dorothy's interaction with an absurdist world.

One area that I feel I did not do as well as I could have done with my edits was punctuation. We had to submit our papers for publication before we talked about punctuation in class, so whenever I had a punctuation concern, I just went with my instincts. My instincts were often wrong; I mourn the deaths of countless innocent semicolons, killed in the prime of their lives, because I thought they were being used too liberally. I did alright with commas. I didn't dare touch the colons (I let my editing partner handle those).

Overall, joining a journal was a lot more fun than I thought it would be. At first, I was worried that sending in my edits every Friday would be stressful, but I actually found my weekly error-hunting to be very relaxing. For me, the hardest part of editing the paper was probably deciding if something was actually an error, or if the phrase was just written in a different way than I would have worded it. However when I was particularly proud of an error I noticed, I would call my husband over to show him. (As a computer science major, he did not always know what I was talking about, but he still managed to show proper excitement about my finds.) I really appreciated this project because I probably would never have joined a journal otherwise. I discovered that editing is something that I really enjoy, and I look forward to joining a journal next year!

Example Edits (More edits can be seen on the version history of the article itself)

Original Sentence:

There **seems** to be two main areas for further existentialist development after examining current criticisms, and as such, two main areas I'll discuss here: one, Dorothy's relationship with bad faith, and two, Dorothy's interaction with an absurdist world.

Proposed revision:

After examining current criticisms, there **seem** to be two main areas for further existentialist development, which I will discuss here: one, Dorothy's relationship with bad faith, and two, Dorothy's interaction with an absurdist world.

Original sentence:

Dorothy was acting in bad faith when she turned into the type of teacher **that she was expected to be by the headmistress and the parents**; however, when she was choosing based on her values and experiences what to teach the children, she was not at all in bad faith.

Revisions: passive voice, literary present

Comment:

rewrite to be in the literary present and remove passive voice.

Example: Dorothy acts in bad faith when she turns into the type of teacher that the headmistress and the parents expect her to be. However, when she chooses based on her values and experiences what to teach the children, she does not at all act in bad faith.

Proposed revision:

Dorothy acts in bad faith when she turns into the type of teacher that **the headmistress and parents expect her to be**; however, when she chooses based on her values and experiences what to teach the children, she does not act in bad faith.

Original Sentence:

When Dorothy starts teaching, she becomes impassioned with a desire to ensure that the students, who were previously taught nothing but handwriting lessons, arithmetic, and other things that impress the parents of the school, have an actual quality **education--however**, the parents of the school find out that their children are doing these things, causing the head of the school to lecture Dorothy for not teaching what the parents think is "impressive" for their child to be learning.

Issue: Make it two separate sentences instead of using an emdash

Revision:

When Dorothy starts teaching, she becomes impassioned with the desire to ensure that the students, who were previously taught nothing but handwriting lessons, arithmetic, and other things that impress the parents of the school, have an actual quality **education**. **However**, the parents of the school find out that their children are learning things less conventionally impressive, causing the head of the school to lecture Dorothy for not teaching what the parents think is most important for their child to learn.

Original:

Whereas Dulley interprets this scene as Kafkaesque, a parallel to *The Metamorphosis*, Smyer argues that the toll of the alarm clock insinuates “that for Dorothy time past provides no comfort, nor does time present offer liberation from the burden of the past” (Smyer 37), **and therefore time** acts as a destructive force within the novel, confronting Dorothy with her own mortality, which then chips away at her faith.

Final Revision: (still not satisfied, a little ambiguous)

Whereas Dulley interprets this scene as Kafkaesque, a parallel to *The Metamorphosis*, Smyer argues that the toll of the alarm clock insinuates “that for Dorothy time past provides no comfort, nor does time present offer liberation from the burden of the past” (Smyer 37). **Therefore, time** acts as a destructive force within the novel, confronting Dorothy with her own mortality, which then chips away at her faith.

Original:

In regards to *The Clergyman’s Daughter*, Dulley asserts that the book resonates most firmly with Sartre’s existentialism, arguing that *The Clergyman’s Daughter* typifies Sartre’s concept of bad faith (**individuals acting in a way that is ingenuine to their true self as a response to the pressures of society, thereby limiting their freedom and ability to act upon their own values (Sartre 44)**) in that Dorothy is caught between the struggle of acting the role of the Clergyman’s daughter--a role determined by her overbearing father and God--which she feels is her necessary duty in life, and finding that her values and faith do not actually conform with what is expected from this role.

Suggestion: This sentence is a little long, which makes it hard to follow. I would suggest splitting it up and possibly making the definition about "bad faith" a separate sentence instead of inside the parentheses. The concept of bad faith is essential to your argument, and you do a great job of explaining it here!

Final Revision:

In regards to *The Clergyman's Daughter*, Dulley asserts that the book resonates most firmly with Sartre's existentialism, arguing that *The Clergyman's Daughter* typifies Sartre's concept of bad faith. **Sartre argues that bad faith is characterized by individuals acting in a way that is ingenuine to their true self as a response to the pressures of society, thereby limiting their freedom and ability to act upon their own values (Sartre 44).** So, by a Sartrean framework, Dorothy is caught between the struggle of acting the role of the Clergyman's daughter—a role determined by her overbearing father and God—which she feels is her necessary duty in life, and finding that her values and faith do not actually conform with what is expected from this role.

Original Sentence: (is she rejecting Mr. Warburton's proposal and choice to join the rectory)
The author argues that Orwell actually shows Dorothy to firmly reject bad faith through her rejection of **Mr. Warburton's proposal and subsequent choice** to rejoin the rectory.

Revision:

I argue that Orwell actually shows Dorothy to firmly reject bad faith through her rejection of Mr. **Warburton's proposal and her subsequent choice** to rejoin the rectory.

Original Sentence:

secondly, his attempt to incentivize Dorothy by painting a bleak picture of her future as a spinster should **she not accept attempts** to force upon her an inevitability of becoming a terrible creature--which would precipitate bad faith as Dorothy would have to conform herself to this future and apparently predictable role in order to agree with this inevitability.

Revision:

secondly, his attempt to incentivize Dorothy **by painting a bleak picture of her future as a spinster should she not accept his proposal attempts** to force upon her an inevitability of becoming a terrible creature—which would precipitate bad faith as Dorothy would have to conform herself to this future and apparently predictable role in order to agree with this inevitability.

Original: (the parenthetical aside seemed distracting to me)

In his famous essay "Myth of Sisyphus", Camus writes that living life having perceived the **absurd is (the absurd as broken down by Camus is essentially the realization that confronting the world as a human being is absurd: there is no hidden or ultimate meaning, and any meaning apparently perceived in the world exists only insofar as one gives it and is noninherent)** quite similar to the mythical king who was ordered to roll a boulder up a hill, only to have it tumble down just as reached the top. Camus states that since life has no meaning, we must either kill ourselves or find some way to live in a meaningless world.

Revision:

In his famous essay “Myth of Sisyphus,” Camus writes that living life having perceived the absurd is quite similar to the mythical king who was ordered to roll a boulder up a hill, only to have it tumble down just as reached the top. **The absurd as broken down by Camus is essentially the realization that confronting the world as a human being is absurd: there is no hidden or ultimate meaning, and any meaning apparently perceived in the world exists only insofar as one gives it and is noninherent.** Camus states that since life has no meaning, we must either kill ourselves or find some way to live in a meaningless world.

Original: (ambiguous pronoun reference)

Guild offers an interesting analysis of why **Gordon’s assimilation into suburbia is beneficial, but one that ultimately falls flat** because of Guild’s failure to include analysis regarding the lack of effectiveness with which Gordon rebels, most likely because this would contradict **his statement.**

Comment: This could be a little ambiguous, so it may be helpful to add a few words for clarification for the reader. Does “his” refer to Gordon or Guild?

If it refers to Guild, which of his statements is this contradicting?

Revision:

Guild offers an interesting analysis of why Gordon’s assimilation into suburbia is beneficial, **but Guild’s argument ultimately falls flat** because of his failure to include analysis regarding the lack of effectiveness with which Gordon rebels, most likely because this would contradict **Guild’s thesis.**

Original: literary present, ambiguous reference

Felski gets closer with her statement that Gordon’s dislike of capitalism **stemmed** from an internalized hierarchy that **caused** him to deprive himself of pleasure that he then **recognized** when he **returned** to suburbia; however, it fails to provide any analysis or insight as to how Gordon truly **broke** free of this hierarchy for the reason that **this character development did not** actually occur.

Revision:

Felski gets closer with her statement that Gordon’s dislike of capitalism stems from an internalized hierarchy that causes him to deprive himself of pleasure that he then recognizes when he returns to suburbia; however, the statement fails to provide any analysis or insight as to how Gordon truly breaks free of this hierarchy for the reason that **this breaking free** does not actually occur.

Original:

His failed attempt to reject everything with a value he believed to stem from capitalism **led** to him rejecting relationships, creativity, and even ambition. Instead of just killing the dragon, he **killed** parts of himself as well.

Revision:

His failed attempt to reject everything with a value he believes to stem from capitalism **leads** to him rejecting relationships, creativity, and even ambition. Instead of just killing the dragon, he **kills** parts of himself as well.

Original:

It is Gordon's misguided belief that if the evils he saw in capitalism that affected his own life and lack of meaningful relationships were simply because other people depended on the "money-god", then by possessing money everything would be fixed, that most likely led him to blindly re-enter suburbia.

Revision:

It is Gordon's misguided belief that since the evils he sees in capitalism that affected his own life and lack of meaningful relationships are simply because other people depended on the "money-god," then by possessing money everything would be fixed. This belief most likely leads him to blindly re-enter suburbia.