

The  
Wow

# e-newsletter

by Ken and Dahlynn McKowen

Principles

Volume 6 No. 2 February 2010

## Avoiding the “Problem Pile”

In reading tens of thousands of stories submitted for the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series, there are several issues that continue to rise to the top of the “problem pile.” They won’t necessarily get your story killed, but they also won’t put your writing effort into the reader/evaluator’s “great story, got to publish it!” pile. Fortunately, *Chicken Soup* is always looking for great stories and not necessarily good writers; that is not the case for most other publications. Most publication editors expect you, as a professional writer, to get the majority of your grammar and punctuation correct in your first submission.

Most of *Chicken Soup*’s published stories are written in first person. Exceptions are rare. That means that the writer is telling his or her own story from his or her own perspective. Unfortunately, some storytellers either write their entire stories in third-person, or part way through, they switch perspectives, going from first-person narrator to third-person observer. Obviously, if you are describing the actions of another person associated with your story, then switching to what appears to be third-person narration is required: *I tossed the baseball to Lizzy, expecting her to catch it. Lizzy missed the ball.* The last sentence is “assumed” to be: *I watched as Lizzy missed the ball.* You, the first-person storyteller, were still the observer.

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One of the good things that you should notice about the first two of Lizzy’s sentences is that they are written in active voice—the subject was performing the action, the action wasn’t controlling the subject. This is another plus for a writer who wishes to write tightly constructed stories. Many writers too easily slip into passive voice adding unneeded words: *The baseball was tossed to Lizzy by me with an expectation that she would catch it. The ball was missed by Lizzy.* Those last two sentences contained a total of 22 words. Notice that in the previous paragraph,



the two sentences stated the same thing, but contained only 15 words—that’s what editors love to see in your submitted stories.

Another problem we see often is the misuse of “who” and “that.” For example: *Lizzy was the girl that should have caught the ball.* UHHGGG!

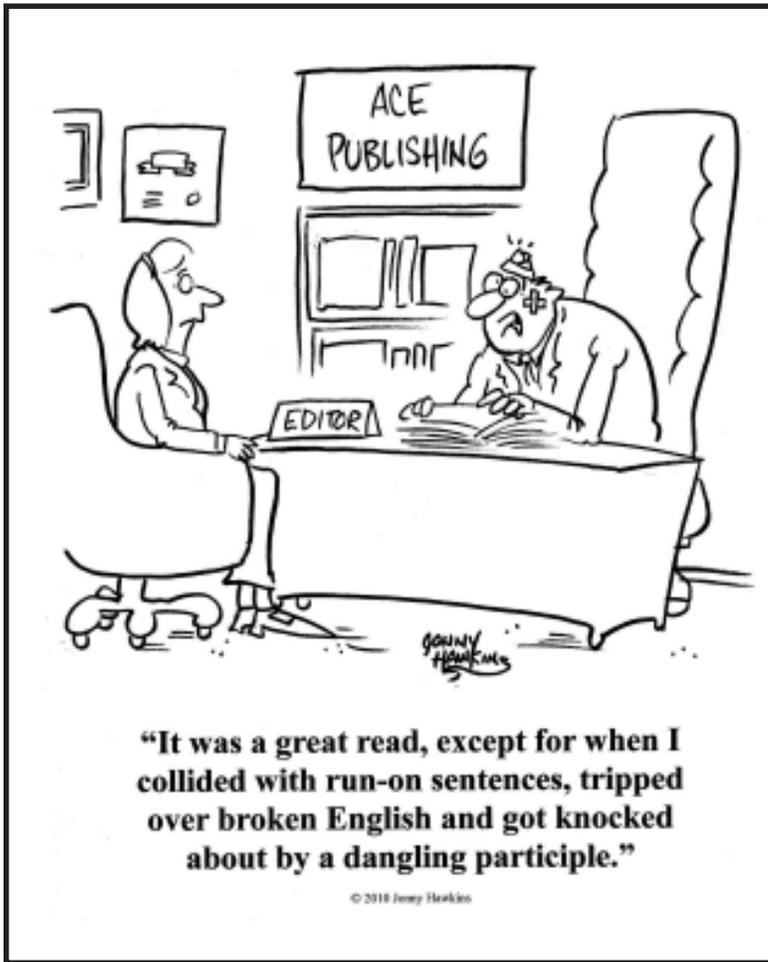
Wrong! If you are talking about a person or an animal with a name (Bowser, Kitty,

etc.), “who” is the preferred choice, not “that,” as illustrated above. If you are writing about an animal without a name or an inanimate object such as a flower, a car, or a tree, then “that” is the preferred choice in such situations: *Lizzy was the girl who should have caught the ball. It was a baseball that bounced off Lizzy’s head.* If concise writing is your goal—as it should be—then “who” and “that” should never have been part of Lizzy’s last sentences to begin with. Simply state the obvious: *Lizzy should have caught the ball. The baseball bounced off Lizzy’s head.*

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Since we are discussing “who,” we should also mention “whom.” It’s one of the many sets of words in this confusing English language of ours that confounds and confuses most of us, much like sit and set, lay and lie, and less and fewer. *Who* is used when someone is the sentence’s subject. *Whom* is used when someone is the object of a preposition or verb. *Lizzy, to whom the ball was thrown, missed it!* is correct. *Lizzy was the person who threw the ball* is also correct. Don’t use “whom” after expressions in your sentence such as “he said.” *Lizzy’s sister, whom she said would throw her the ball* is incorrect. It

should read: *Lizzy’s sister, who she said would throw her the ball* is correct. The “who” is referencing the subject of the following verb “throw,” not Lizzy. Confused yet?

If you didn’t major in English in college, or you’ve never attended college, how do you get all—or at least most—of your grammar and punctuation correct? First, take advantage of the many resources ready and willing to help you. We tend to rely on *The Associated Press Stylebook*, *The Elements of Style*, and *The Chicago Manual of Style*. While we have these books in our office within arm’s reach, they are also available online, along with dozens of others, as a

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## Avoiding the “Problem Pile”

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quick Google search for “grammar” will reveal. We also read each other’s writings, often catching unclear sentences, misplaced modifiers, and errant commas.

What do you do if you’ve referenced all of your resources and asked a friend to read your writing, but still can’t decide if what you have written is grammatically correct? Do what we do—rewrite the questionable sentence in a different form! If it doesn’t read smoothly to you, it will probably read the same way to an editor. Better to be safe than unpublished! 

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We found this little jewel of a website when searching for fun grammar quizzes. The first question, and answer, is below. When you go to the site (address below), be sure to scroll down past the “This is an Emergency Grammar Test” section; the quiz can be found there. Good luck!

<http://jcomm.uoregon.edu/~russial/grammar/grambo.html#q1>

**1. I see a light at the end of the tunnel, it’s probably a mirror.**  
Is the sentence [Correct](#)? Is the sentence [Incorrect](#)?

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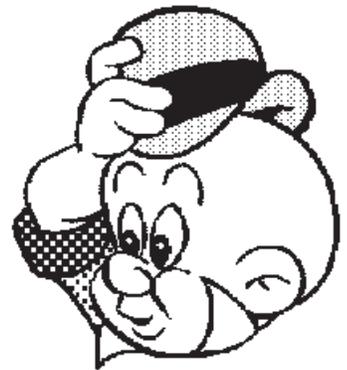
The sentence is incorrect!

**A tip o’ the hat to you; you have found the problem.**

The comma after *tunnel* is not just any old comma; it creates the **dreaded comma splice**. The problem is known by this rather arcane moniker because the comma **splices**, or joins, two clauses that it really should not be connecting. The sentence needs a pause that has more oomph. A semicolon would do, a period would do too. There you go again. The sentence before last is another example of the same problem. It should read: **A semicolon would do; a period would do too.** One other thing: Should there be a comma after do? Nah. Really doesn’t need it.

Here are two correct versions of Question 1:

- 1. I see a light at the end of the tunnel; it’s probably a mirror.**
- 2. I see a light at the end of the tunnel. It’s probably a mirror.**



**HOT STUFF! HOT STUFF! HOT STUFF! HOT STUFF! HOT STUFF!**

## *Chicken Soup for the Soul* [www.ChickenSoup.com](http://www.ChickenSoup.com)

*New Moms: Deadline: February 28, 2010*

**HURRY!** *Devotional for Mothers: Deadline: Feb. 28, 2010*

*Family Matters: Deadline: Feb. 28, 2010*

*Grandmothers: Deadline: March 31, 2010*

*Grieving and Recovery: Deadline: March 31, 2010*

*My Dog's Life: Deadline: March 30, 2010*

*My Cat's Life: Deadline: March 30, 2010*

*Preteens: Deadline: June 30, 2010*

*Teens: Deadline: June 30, 2010*



## *Cup of Comfort* [www.CupofComfort.com](http://www.CupofComfort.com)

*For Couples: Deadline: April 20, 2010* Finalist notification: June 15, 2010

### *C of C and REDBOOK Contest!*

*Cup of Comfort* and *REDBOOK* are holding a "Your Love Story" contest. Readers can submit their 1,000 - 2,000 word true love stories. Deadline: April 20, 2010, notification by July 10, 2010.

Grand Prize: \$1,000, first placement in *A Cup of Comfort for Couples*, a full set of the *Cup of Comfort* library, story featured in *REDBOOK*'s Feb. 2011 issue and at [www.CupofComfort.com](http://www.CupofComfort.com).

3 Runners-Up: \$150 each, stories to appear in the *Couple's* book, names included in *REDBOOK*, stories posted on *Cup of Comfort* blog posts, and a full set of the *Cup of Comfort* library.

Contest rules and info: [www.CupofComfort.com](http://www.CupofComfort.com)

***Go for it! Get published!***