

# **Recognising and avoiding ambiguity**

# What do you mean?

- Can you work out the problem?

This cupboard is  
alarmed.

# What do you mean?

- Does it mean:

a) the cupboard is scared or alarmed about something!



or...



*I am very worried*

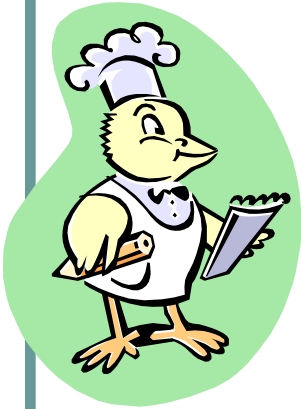
b) there is an alarm on the cupboard

# Ambiguous

- If a sentence or idea is **ambiguous** it is not clear. The main message is confused.
- Good writers will always try to avoid ambiguity so that their ideas are easily and clearly understood.

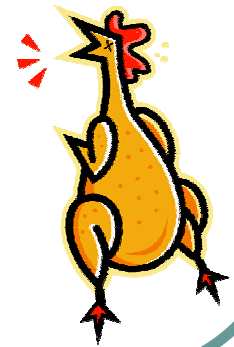
# Ambiguity

- Lots of jokes rely on ambiguity:



*Is it good manners  
to eat fried chicken  
with your fingers?*

*No, you should  
eat your fingers  
separately!*



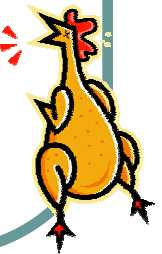
# Ambiguity

- Ok it wasn't the best ever joke but how does it work?

Question: Is it good manners to eat fried chicken with your fingers?

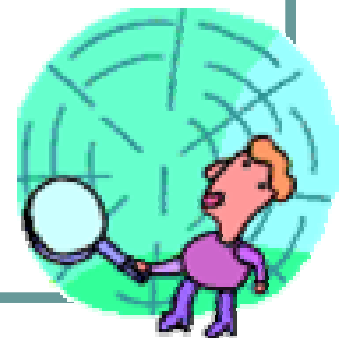
Answer: No, you should eat your fingers separately.

*The joke relies on the fact that there is some ambiguity in the question - the response relies on the fact that you will realise that there is a misunderstanding*



# Spotting ambiguity

- You know you should always proofread your work – if you do this you should spot errors and ambiguity.
- Read through these examples of students' work. **Try to spot the ambiguity.**



# Spotting ambiguity

- *It was called the Globe.*

'It' is a determiner – but it is not clear what the writer is referring to.
- *Daniel was delighted and he told his friend Greg. He had won the fancy dress competition.*

The problem is the pronoun 'he'. Which person is being referred to? Daniel or Greg? The sentence needs to be clearer.



# Spotting ambiguity

- *He walked into the forbidding door.*

He is a pronoun and it could work in the sentence but is the door forbidding him to go through? This part is less clear.
- *She had not handed in her homework again. Her teacher was unhappy and so she angrily told her she was annoyed.*

The use of pronouns is the problem - 'she' and 'her' does not make it clear which person the sentence is referring to – the teacher or the student.

# Spotting ambiguity

- Pronouns are words that writers use to refer to a noun.

he

she

we

they

us

you

*Using them gives writers the ability to vary their writing but you need to be careful that you don't overuse pronouns and that it is clear which nouns they are replacing.*

# Avoiding ambiguity

## Top tips!

- ✓ Check the order of ideas or add punctuation to make your ideas clear.
- ✓ Check the order of words.
- ✓ Check sentences aren't too brief –you might need to elaborate to make the meaning clear. This might help to make your writing unambiguous.