

Lesson

3

Actions

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *HAMLET*, 3.2.

I am unlikely to trust a sentence that comes easily.

—WILLIAM GASS

UNDERSTANDING JUDGMENTS

We have words enough to praise writing we like—*clear, direct, concise*—and more than enough to abuse writing we don't: *unclear, indirect, abstract, dense, complex*. We can use those words to distinguish these two sentences:

1a. The cause of our schools' failure at teaching basic skills is not understanding the influence of cultural background on learning.

1b. Our schools have failed to teach basic skills because they do not understand how cultural background influences the way a child learns.

Most of us would call (1a) too complex, (1b) clearer and more direct. But those words don't refer to anything *in* those sentences; they describe how those sentences make us *feel*. When we say that (1a) is unclear, we mean that we have a hard time understanding it; we say it's dense when *we* struggle to read it.

The problem is to understand what is in those two sentences that makes readers feel as they do. Only then can you rise above

your too-good understanding of your own writing to know when your readers will think it needs revising. To do that, you have to know what counts as a well-told story. (To profit from this lesson and the next three, you must be able to identify verbs, SIMPLE SUBJECTS, and WHOLE SUBJECTS. See the Glossary.)

TELLING STORIES: CHARACTERS AND ACTIONS

This story has a problem:

2a. Once upon a time, as a walk through the woods was taking place on the part of Little Red Riding Hood, the Wolf's jump out from behind a tree occurred, causing her fright.

We prefer something closer to this:

✓ 2b. Once upon a time, Little Red Riding Hood was walking through the woods, when the Wolf jumped out from behind a tree and frightened her.

Most readers think (2b) tells the story more clearly than (2a) because it follows two principles:

- The main characters are subjects of verbs.
- Those verbs express specific actions.

Principle of Clarity 1: Make Main Characters Subjects

Look at the subjects in (2a). The simple subjects (underlined) are *not* the main characters (italicized):

2a. Once upon a time, as a walk through the woods was taking place on the part of *Little Red Riding Hood*, the *Wolf's jump* out from behind a tree occurred, causing *her* fright.

Those subjects name not characters but actions expressed in abstract nouns, *walk* and *jump*:

SUBJECT	VERB
a walk through the woods	was taking place
the <i>Wolf's jump</i> out from behind a tree	occurred

The whole subject of *occurred* does have a character in it: the possessive noun *Wolf's jump*. But the Wolf is not *the* subject. It is only attached to the simple subject *jump*.

Contrast those abstract subjects with these, where the characters (italicized) are also the simple subjects (underlined):

- ✓ 2b. Once upon a time, *Little Red Riding Hood* was walking through the woods, when the *Wolf* jumped out from behind a tree and frightened *her*.

The subjects and the main characters are now the same words:

SUBJECT/CHARACTER	VERB
<i>Little Red Riding Hood</i>	was walking
<i>Wolf</i>	jumped

Principle of Clarity 2: Make Important Actions Verbs

Now look at how the actions and verbs differ in (2a): the characters' actions are expressed not in verbs but in abstract nouns (actions are boldfaced; verbs are capitalized):

- 2a. Once upon a time, as a **walk** through the woods was **TAKING** place on the part of *Little Red Riding Hood*, the **Wolf's jump** out from behind a tree **OCCURRED**, causing her **fright**.

Note how vague the verbs are: *was taking, occurred*. The story isn't about *taking* and *occurring* but about *walking* and *jumping* and *frightening*. In (2b), the clearer sentence, the verbs name these important story actions:

- ✓ 2b. Once upon a time, *Little Red Riding Hood* was **WALKING** through the woods, when the **Wolf JUMPED** out from behind a tree and **FRIGHTENED** her.

Here's the point: In (2a), the sentence that seems wordy and indirect, the two main characters, *Little Red Riding Hood* and the *Wolf*, are *not* subjects, and their actions—*walking, jumping, and frightening*—are *not* verbs. In (2b), the more direct sentence, those two main characters *are* subjects and their main actions *are* verbs. That's why we prefer (2b).

FAIRY TALES AND “SERIOUS” WRITING

Writing in college or on the job may seem distant from fairy tales like “Little Red Riding Hood.” But it's not, because in every kind

of writing, most sentences still tell stories. That is, they are still about characters doing things. Compare these two:

- 3a. The Federalists' argument in regard to the destabilization of government by popular democracy was based on their belief in the tendency of factions to further their self-interest at the expense of the common good.

- ✓ 3b. The Federalists argued that popular democracy destabilized government, because they believed that factions tended to further their self-interest at the expense of the common good.

We can analyze those sentences as we did the ones about *Little Red Riding Hood*.

Sentence (3a) feels dense for two reasons. First, its characters are not subjects. Its simple subject (underlined) is *argument*, but the characters (italicized) are *Federalists, popular democracy, government, and factions*:

- 3a. The *Federalists'* argument in regard to the destabilization of government by *popular democracy* was based on *their* belief in the tendency of *factions* to further *their* self-interest at the expense of the common good.

Second, the important actions (boldfaced) are not verbs (capitalized) but abstract nouns:

- 3a. The Federalists' **argument** in regard to the **destabilization** of government by popular democracy was **BASED** on their **belief** in the **tendency** of factions to **FURTHER** their self-interest at the expense of the common good.

Notice how long and complex is the whole subject of (3a) and how little meaning is expressed by its main verb *was based*:

WHOLE SUBJECT

The Federalists' argument in regard to the destabilization of government by popular democracy was based

VERB

Readers think (3b) is clearer for two reasons: most of the characters (italicized) are subjects (underlined), and the actions (boldfaced) are verbs (capitalized):

- ✓ 3b. The *Federalists* **ARGUED** that *popular democracy* **DESTABILIZED** government, because *they* **BELIEVED** that *factions* **TENDED** TO **FURTHER** their self-interest at the expense of the common good.

Note as well that when we make a character the simple subject, the whole subject (*The Federalists*) also becomes short and concrete.

In the rest of this lesson, we look at verbs and actions; in the next, at subjects and characters.

VERBS AND ACTIONS

Our principle is this: a sentence seems clear when its important actions are in verbs. Look at how sentences (4a) and (4b) express their actions. In (4a), most of the actions (boldfaced) are not verbs (capitalized); they are nouns:

4a. Our **lack** of data **prevented** **evaluation** of UN **actions** in **targeting** funds to areas most in **need** of **assistance**.

In (4b), on the other hand, the actions are almost all verbs:

✓ 4b. Because we **lacked** data, we could not **evaluate** whether the UN **had targeted** funds to areas that most **needed** **assistance**.

Readers will think your writing is dense if you use lots of abstract nouns, especially those derived from verbs and ADJECTIVES, nouns ending in *-tion*, *-ment*, *-ence*, and so on, and especially when you make those abstract nouns the subjects of verbs.

A noun derived from a verb or adjective has a technical name: nominalization. The word illustrates its meaning: when we nominalize *nominalize*, we create the nominalization *nominalization*. Here are a few examples:

VERB → NOMINALIZATION	ADJECTIVE → NOMINALIZATION
discover → discovery	careless → carelessness
resist → resistance	different → difference
react → reaction	proficient → proficiency

We can also nominalize a verb by adding *-ing* (making it a gerund):

She flies → her flying We sang → our singing

Some nominalizations and verbs are identical:

hope → hope result → result repair → repair

We **REQUEST** that you **REVIEW** the data.

Our **request** is that you do a **review** of the data.

(Some actions also hide out in adjectives: *It is applicable → it applies*. Some others: *indicative, dubious, argumentative, deserving*.)

Don't start with them

No element of style more characterizes writing that feels dense, abstract, indirect, and difficult than lots of nominalizations, especially as the subjects of verbs.

Here's the point: In grade school, we learned that subjects are characters (or "doers") and that verbs are actions. That's often true:

subject	verb	object
We	discussed	the problem.
doer	action	

But it is not true for this almost synonymous sentence:

subject	verb	topic	of our discussion.
The problem	was	the topic	doer action

We can move characters and actions around in a sentence, and subjects and verbs don't have to name any particular kind of thing at all. But when you match characters to subjects and actions to verbs in most of your sentences, readers are likely to think your prose is clear, direct, and readable.

Exercise 3.1

If you aren't sure whether you can distinguish verbs, adjectives, and nominalizations, practice on the list below. Turn verbs and adjectives into nominalizations, and nominalizations into adjectives and verbs. Remember that some verbs and nominalizations have the same form:

Heavy rains cause flooding.

Heavy rains are a cause of flooding.

analysis	believe	attempt	conclusion	evaluate
suggest	approach	comparison	define	discuss
expression	failure	intelligent	thorough	appearance
decrease	improve	increase	accuracy	careful
emphasize	explanation	description	clear	examine

Exercise 3.2

Identify the subject, character, verb, and action in these pairs of sentences. The unclear sentence is first; the improved sentence follows. What do you notice about how characters and subjects, and actions and verbs, are aligned in each?

- 1a. There is opposition among many voters to nuclear power plants based on a belief in their threat to human health.
- 1b. Many voters oppose nuclear power plants because they believe that such plants threaten human health.
- 2a. Growth in the market for electronic books is driven by the frequent preference among customers for their convenience and portability.
- 2b. The market for electronic books has grown because customers frequently prefer their convenience and portability.
- 3a. There is a belief among some researchers that consumers' choices in fast food restaurants are healthier because there are postings of nutrition information in menus.
- 3b. Some researchers believe that consumers are choosing healthier foods because fast food restaurants are posting nutrition information in their menus.
- 4a. The design of the new roller coaster was more of a struggle for the engineers than had been their expectation.
- 4b. The engineers struggled more than they expected when designing the new roller coaster.
- 5a. Because the student's preparation for the exam was thorough, none of the questions on it were a surprise.
- 5b. Because the student prepared thoroughly for the exam, she was not surprised by any of the questions on it.

Exercise 3.3

Create three sentences using verbs and adjectives from Exercise 3.1. Then rewrite them using the corresponding nominalizations (keep the meaning the same). For example, using *suggest*, *discuss*, and *careful*, write:

I suggest that we discuss the issue CAREFULLY.

Then rewrite that sentence into its nominalized form:

My **suggestion** is that our **discussion** of the issue be done with **care**.

Only when you see how a clear sentence can be made unclear will you understand why it seemed clear in the first place.

THE PROBLEM OF FAMILIARITY

Writers tend to write badly when they are unsure about what they want to say or how to say it. But they also tend to write badly because they are too familiar with their own writing to accurately judge how readers will respond to it.

You've probably had this experience: you think you've written something good, but your reader thinks otherwise. You wonder whether that person is just being difficult, but you bite your tongue and try to fix it, even though you think it should already be clear to anyone who can read Dr. Seuss. When that happens to me (regularly, I might add), I almost always realize—eventually—that my readers are right, that they see where my writing needs work better than I do.

Why are we so often right about the writing of others and so often wrong about our own? It is because we all read into our own writing what we want readers to get out of it. That explains why two readers can disagree about the clarity of the same piece of writing: the reader who is most familiar with its content will likely find it clearest. Both are right, because clarity is not a property of sentences but an impression of readers. It is in the eye of the beholder.

That is why we need to look at our own writing in a way that is almost mechanical, that sidesteps our too-good understanding of it. The quickest way is to follow the procedure below.

HOW TO REVISE: CHARACTERS AND ACTIONS

You can use the two principles of clarity (make main characters subjects; make important actions verbs) to explain why your readers judge your prose as they do. But more important, you can also use them to identify and revise sentences that seem clear to you but will not to your readers. Revision is a three-step process: analyze, assess, rewrite.

1. Analyze

- a. Ignoring short (four- or five-word) introductory phrases, underline the first seven or eight words in each sentence.

The automation of manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes by corporations means the loss of jobs for many blue-collar workers.

- b. Then ask two questions:

- Did you underline any abstract nouns as simple subjects?

The **automation** of manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes by corporations means the loss of jobs for many blue-collar workers.

- Did you underline seven or eight words before getting to a verb?

The **automation** of manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes by corporations (10 words) **means** the loss of jobs for many blue-collar workers.

- If you answer *yes* to either, you should probably revise.

2. Assess

- Decide who or what your main characters are (more about this in the next lesson).

The automation of manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes by **corporations** means the loss of jobs for many **blue-collar workers**.

- Then look for the actions that those characters perform, especially actions hidden in nominalizations, those abstract nouns derived from verbs.

The **automation** of manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes by corporations means the **loss** of jobs for many blue-collar workers.

3. Rewrite

- If the actions are nominalizations, make them verbs.

automation → automate loss → lose

- Make the characters the subjects of those verbs.

corporations automate blue-collar workers lose

- Rewrite the sentence with characters as subjects and actions as verbs, using subordinating conjunctions such as *because*, *if*, *when*, *although*, *why*, *how*, *whether*, or *that* to show relationships among ideas.

✓ Many blue-collar workers are losing their jobs **because** corporations are automating their manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes.

SOME COMMON PATTERNS

You can quickly spot and revise five common patterns of nominalizations.

1. The nominalization is the subject of an empty verb such as *be*, *seems*, *has*, etc.:

The **intention** of the committee is to audit the records.

- Change the nominalization to a verb:
intention → intend

- Find a character that would be the subject of that verb:
The intention of the *committee* is to audit the records.

- Make that character the subject of the new verb:
✓ The *committee* **INTENDS** to audit the records.

2. The nominalization follows an empty verb:

The *agency* **CONDUCTED** an **investigation** into the matter.

- Change the nominalization to a verb:
investigation → investigate

- Replace the empty verb with the new verb:
conducted → investigated

✓ The *agency* **INVESTIGATED** the matter.

3. One nominalization is the subject of an empty verb and a second nominalization follows it:

Our **loss** in sales was a result of their **expansion** of outlets.

- Revise the nominalizations into verbs:

loss → lose expansion → expand

- Identify the characters that would be the subjects of those verbs:

Our **loss** in sales was a result of *their* **expansion** of outlets.

- Make those characters subjects of those verbs:

we lose they expand

- Link the new clauses with a logical connection:

- To express simple cause: *because*, *since*, *when*
- To express conditional cause: *if*, *provided that*, *so long as*
- To contradict expected causes: *though*, *although*, *unless*

Our **loss** in sales → We **lost** sales
 was the result of → because
 their **expansion** of outlets → they **expanded** outlets

4. A nominalization follows *there is* or *there are*:

There is no **need** for our further **study** of this problem.

a. Change the nominalization to a verb:

need → need study → study

b. Identify the character that should be the subject of the verb:

There is no **need** for *our* further **study** of this problem.

c. Make that character the subject of the verb:

no need → we need not our study → we study

✓ We **NEED** not **study** this problem further.

5. Two or three nominalizations in a row are joined by prepositions:

We did a **review** of the **evolution** of the brain.

a. Turn the first nominalization into a verb:

review → review

b. Either leave the second nominalization as it is, or turn it into a verb in a clause beginning with *how* or *why*:

evolution of the brain → how the brain evolved

✓ First, we **REVIEWED** the **evolution** of the brain.

✓ First, we **REVIEWED** how the brain **EVOLVED**.

SOME HAPPY CONSEQUENCES

★ When you consistently rely on verbs to express important actions, your readers benefit in many ways:

1. Your sentences are more concrete. Compare:

There was an affirmative **decision** for **expansion**.

✓ *The director* **DECIDED** to **EXPAND** the program.

2. Your sentences are more concise. When you use nominalizations, you have to add articles like *a* and *the* and prepositions such as *of*, *by*, and *in*. You don't need them when you use verbs and conjunctions:

A **revision** of the program will **result** in **increases** in our **efficiency** in the **servicing** of clients.

✓ If we **REVISE** the program, we **CAN SERVE** clients more **EFFICIENTLY**.

3. The logic of your sentences is clearer. When you nominalize verbs, you link actions with fuzzy prepositions and phrases such as *of*, *by*, and *on the part of*. But when you use verbs, you link clauses with precise subordinating conjunctions such as *because*, *although*, and *if*:

Our more effective presentation of our study resulted in our success, despite an earlier start by others.

✓ **Although** others started earlier, we succeeded **because** we presented our study more effectively.

4. Your sentences tell more coherent stories. Nominalizations let you distort the sequence of actions. (The numbers refer to the real sequence of events.)

Decisions⁴ in regard to administration⁵ of medication despite inability² of irrational patients appearing¹ in a Trauma Center to provide legal consent³ rest with the attending physician alone.

✓ When patients appear¹ in a Trauma Center and behave² so irrationally that they cannot legally consent³ to treatment, only the attending physician can decide⁴ whether to medicate⁵ them.

QUICK TIP

When you revise a complicated sentence, you will have more than one character-action clause. Decide how the clauses fit together, then try out these patterns: *X because Y*; *Since X, Y*; *If X, then Y*; *Although X, Y*; *X and but so Y*

Exercise 3.4

One sentence in each of these pairs is clear, expressing characters as subjects and actions as verbs; the other is less clear, with actions in

2. A short nominalization that replaces an awkward *The fact that*:

The fact that she ADMITTED guilt impressed me.

✓ Her admission of guilt impressed me.

But then, why not this?

✓ She IMPRESSED me when she ADMITTED her guilt.

3. A nominalization that names what would be the object of the verb:

I accepted what she REQUESTED [that is, *She requested something*].

✓ I accepted her request.

Familiar nominalizations such as *request* feel more concrete than abstract ones. But when you can, you should still express actions as verbs:

Her request for assistance CAME after the deadline.

✓ She REQUESTED assistance after the deadline.

4. A nominalization that refers to a concept so familiar to your readers that to them, it is a virtual character (more about this in the next lesson):

✓ Few problems have so divided us as abortion on demand.

✓ The Equal Rights Amendment was an issue in past elections.

✓ Taxation without representation did not spark the American Revolution.

Those nominalizations name familiar concepts: *abortion on demand*, *amendment*, *election*, *taxation*, *representation*, *revolution*. You must develop an eye for distinguishing nominalizations expressing common ideas from those you can revise into verbs:

There is a demand for a repeal of the inheritance tax.

✓ We DEMAND that Congress REPEAL the inheritance tax.

CLARITY, NOT SIMPLEMENTEDNESS

Your readers want you to write clearly, even simply—but not simplistically (see p. 21). Some argue that all sentences should be short, no more than fifteen words or so. But many mature ideas cannot

be expressed so compactly. In Lessons 10 and 11 we look at ways to write longer sentences that communicate complex ideas but are still readable.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Exercise 3.7

Go through a page of your own writing. Underline whole subjects and bracket verbs. Now, think about the story you are telling. Circle the main characters and box their actions, wherever they appear. Look especially for actions hidden in nominalizations. What do you notice? How clear will a reader likely find your writing? If necessary, revise to align characters with subjects and specific actions with verbs.

Exercise 3.8

Writers tend to think their writing is clearer than their readers do. Select a page of your writing and share it with a reader. Both of you rate its clarity on a scale of 1–10, with 10 being perfectly clear and 1 being incomprehensible. Use the procedures for analyzing sentences on pages 35–36 to explain any differences in your ratings. Revise your writing if necessary.

SUMMING UP

The two most general principles for clear sentences are these: make main characters the subjects of your verbs; make those characters' important actions your verbs.

We can represent these principles graphically. Readers must mentally integrate two levels of sentence structure. One, the grammatical level, is the relatively fixed sequence of subject and verb (the empty box is for everything that follows the verb):

Fixed Positions

Subject

Verb

Grammar Level

The other, the story level, is based on characters and their actions and has no fixed order. Characters and actions can appear anywhere in a sentence, because writers can move them around.

But readers prefer them to align with subjects and verbs. We can represent this preference graphically:

Fixed Positions	Subject	Verb	_____	Grammar Level
Movable Elements	Character	Action	_____	Story Level

Keep in mind that readers want to see characters not just *in* a subject, but *as* the subject. Not this:

The president's veto of the bill INFURIATED Congress.

The veto of the bill by the president INFURIATED Congress.

But this:

✓ When the *president* VETOED the bill, *he* INFURIATED Congress.

When you frustrate those expectations, you make readers work harder than necessary. So **keep** these principles in mind as you revise:

1. Express actions in verbs:

The **intention** of the committee is to improve morale.

✓ The committee **INTENDS** to improve morale.

2. Make the subjects of those verbs the characters associated with those actions:

A decision by the *dean* in regard to the funding of the program by the *department* is necessary for adequate *staff* preparation.

✓ The *staff* **CAN PREPARE** adequately, only after the *dean* **DECIDES** whether the *department* **WILL FUND** the program.

3. Don't revise nominalizations when:

a. they refer to a previous sentence:

✓ **These arguments** all depend on a single unproven claim.

b. they replace an awkward *the fact that*:

The fact that she strenuously objected impressed me.

✓ **Her strenuous objections** impressed me.

c. they name what would be the object of a verb:

I do not know **what she INTENDS**.

✓ I do not know **her intentions**.

d. they name a concept so familiar to your readers that it is a virtual character:

✓ Few issues have so divided us as **abortion on demand**.

✓ The Equal Rights **Amendment** was an issue in past **elections**.