

An Excerpt from *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* (Part Two)

By Joseph M. Williams

As we read a sentence, we have to integrate two levels of its structure: one is its predictable grammatical sequence: Subject + Verb + Complement; the other level is its story, a level of meaning whose parts have no fixed order: Characters + Actions. To a significant degree, we judge a style to be clear or unclear according to how consistently a writer aligns those two levels. We usually feel we are reading prose that is clear, direct, and readable when a writer consistently expresses the crucial actions of her story in verbs and her central characters (real or abstract) in their subjects. We usually feel that we are reading prose that is gummy, abstract, and difficult when a writer unnecessarily dislocates actions from verbs and (almost by necessity) locates characters away from subjects, or deletes them entirely. There are details about these principles worth examining.

Subjects and Characters

There are many kinds of characters. The most important are agents, the direct source of an action or condition. There are collective agents:

Faculties of national eminence do not always teach well.

secondary or remote agents:

Mayor Daley built Chicago into a giant among cities.

and even figurative agents that stand for the real agents:

The White House announced today the President's schedule.

The business sector is cooperating.

In some sentences, we use subjects to name things that are really the means, the instrument by which some unstated agent performs an action, making the instrument seem like the agent of that action:

This evidence proves my theory.

That is,

With this evidence I prove my theory.

In the original sentence, the instrument acts so much like an agent that there is little point in revising it.

Some characters do not appear in a sentence at all, so that when we revise, we have to supply them:

In the last sentence of the Gettysburg Address there is a rallying cry for the continuation of the struggle.

In the last sentence of the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln rallied his audience to continue the struggle against the South.

In other sentences, the writer may imply a character in an adjective:

Determination of policy occurs at the presidential level.

The President determines policy.

Most often, though, characters in abstract prose modify one of those abstract nouns or are objects of prepositions such as *by*, *of*, *on the part of*:

The Federalists' belief that the instability of government was a consequence of popular democracy was based on their belief in the tendency on the part of factions to further their self-interest at the expense of the common good.

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

Verbs and Actions

As we'll use the word here, "action" will cover not only physical movement, but also mental processes, feelings, relationships, literal or figurative. In these next four sentences, the meaning becomes clearer as the verbs become more specific:

There has been effective staff information dissemination control on the part of the Secretary.

The Secretary has exercised effective staff information dissemination control.

The Secretary has effectively controlled staff information dissemination.

The Secretary has effectively controlled how his staff disseminates information.

The crucial actions aren't *be* or *exercise*, but *control* and *disseminate*.

Most writers of turgid prose typically use a verb not to express action but merely to state that an action exists:

A need exists for greater candidate selection efficiency. = *We must select candidates more efficiently.*

There is the possibility of prior approval of it. = *He may approve of it ahead of time.*

There is a technical term for a noun derived from a verb or an adjective. It

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is called a *nominalization*. Nominalization is itself a noun derived from a verb, *nominalize*. Here are some examples:

Verb	→	Nominalization
discover		discovery
move		movement
fail		failure
refuse		refusal
Adjective	→	Nominalization
careless		carelessness
difficult		difficulty
different		difference
applicable		applicability

Some nominalizations are identical to their corresponding verb: *hope* → *hope*, *charge* → *charge*, *result* → *result*, *answer* → *answer*, *repair* → *repair*, *return* → *return*.

Nominalization might sound like jargon, but it's a useful term.

Looking for Nominalizations

A few patterns of useless nominalizations are easy to spot and revise.

1. When the nominalization follows a verb, with little specific meaning, change the nominalization to a verb that can replace the empty verb:

The police conducted an investigation into the matter.

The police investigated the matter.

2. When the nominalization follows *there is* or *there are*, change the nominalization to a verb and find a subject:

There is a need for further study of this program.

The engineering staff must study this program further.

3. When the nominalization is the subject of an empty verb, change the nominalization to a verb and find a new subject:

The intention of the IRS is to audit the records of the program.

The IRS intends to audit the records of the program.

4. When you find consecutive nominalizations, turn the first one into a verb. Then either leave the second or

turn it into a verb in a clause beginning with *how* or *why*:

There was first a review of the evolution of the dorsal fin.

First, she reviewed the evolution of the dorsal fin.

First, she reviewed how the dorsal fin evolved.

5. We have to revise more extensively when a nominalization in a subject is linked to a second nominalization in the predicate by a verb or phrase that logically connects them:

Subject: *Their cessation of hostilities*

Logical connection: *was because of*

Object: *their personnel losses.*

(b) Find subjects for those verbs: *they ceased, they lost.*

(c) Link the new clauses with a word that expresses their logical connection. That connection will typically be some kind of causal relationship:

To express simple cause: *because, since, when*

To express conditional cause: *if, provided that, so long as*

To contradict expected cause: *though, although, unless.*

Schematically, we do this:

Their cessation of hostilities was because of their personnel loss → *they ceased hostilities because they lost personnel*

Useful Nominalizations

In some cases, nominalizations are useful, even necessary. Don't revise these.



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1. The nominalization is a subject referring to a previous sentence:

These arguments all depend on a single unproven claim.

This decision can lead to costly consequences.

These nominalizations let us link sentences into a more cohesive flow.

2. The nominalization names what would be the object of its verb:

I do not understand either her meaning or his intention.

This is a bit more compact than, "I do not understand either *what she means* or *what he intends*."

3. Some nominalizations refer to an often repeated concept:

Few issues have so divided Americans as abortion on demand.

The Equal Rights Amendment was an issue in past elections.

Taxation without representation was not the central concern of the American Revolution.

In these sentences, the nominalization names concepts that we refer to repeatedly: *abortion on demand*, *Amendment*, *election*, *taxation*, *representation*, *Revolution*. Rather than repeatedly spell out a familiar concept in a full clause, we contract it into a noun. In these cases, the abstractions often become virtual actors.

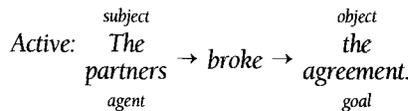
And, of course, some nominalizations refer to ideas that we can express only in nominalizations: *freedom*, *death*, *love*, *hope*, *life*, *wisdom*. If we couldn't turn some verbs or adjectives into nouns, we would find it difficult—perhaps impossible—to discuss those subjects that have preoccupied us for millennia. You simply have to develop an eye—or an ear—for the nominalization that expresses one of these ideas and the nominalization that hides a significant action:

There is a demand for an end to taxation on entertainment.

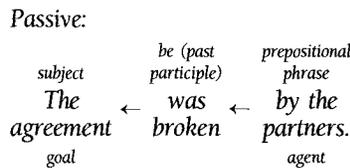
We demand that the government stop taxing entertainment.

Passives and Agents

In addition to avoiding abstract nominalizations, you can make your style more direct if you also avoid unnecessary passive verbs. In active sentences, the subject typically expresses the agent of an action, and the object expresses the goal or the thing changed by the action:



In passive sentences, the subject expresses the goal of an action; a form of *be* precedes a past participle form of the verb; and the agent of the action may or may not be expressed in a *by*-phrase:



We can usually make our style more vigorous and direct if we avoid both nominalizations and unnecessary passive verbs.

When we combine passives with nominalizations, we create that wretched prose we call legalese, sociological-ese, educationalese, bureaucrat-ese—all of the *-eses* of those who confuse authority and objectivity with polysyllabic abstraction and remote impersonality:

Patient movement to less restrictive methods of care may be followed by increased probability of recovery.

If we treat patients less restrictively, they may recover faster.

But those are the easy generalizations. In many other cases, we may find that the passive is, in fact, the better choice.

Choosing Between Active and Passive

To choose between the active and the passive, we have to answer two questions: First, must our audience know who is performing the action?

Second, are we maintaining a logically consistent string of subjects?

Often, we avoid stating who is responsible for an action, because we don't know or don't care, or because we'd just rather not say:

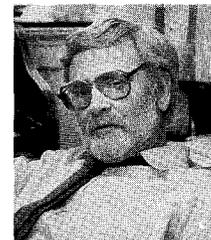
Those who are found guilty of murder can be executed.

Valuable records should always be kept in a fireproof safe.

In sentences like these, the passive is the natural and correct choice. In this next sentence, we might also predict the passive, but for a different reason, one having to do with avoiding responsibility:

Because the final safety inspection was neither performed nor monitored, the brake plate assembly mechanism was left incorrectly aligned, a fact that was known several months before it was decided to publicly reveal that information.

This kind of writing raises issues more significant than mere clarity.



Joseph M. Williams is Professor of English and Linguistics at the University of Chicago. He is also a visiting faculty member at the National Judicial College at the University of Nevada-Reno and has

been a regular participant in the American Bar Association's National Appellate Practice Institute for the last several years. He is the author of several books and articles on the English language, including *Origins of the English Language*, Macmillan 1975, which was selected to accompany the college and university version of PBS's *Story of English*. The earlier version of *Style*, published by Scott, Foresman (3d ed, 1989) has been described as "The best book there is for advanced writers" in the *Continuing Legal Education Reporter*. Professor Williams is also a managing partner in Clearlines, a consulting firm that specializes in legal writing. Their clients have included over 50 law firms and numerous divisions of state and federal government.

The second consideration is more complex: it is whether the subjects in a sequence of sentences are consistent. In this next passage the writer wanted to write about the end of World War II from the point of view of Germany and Japan. So in each of her sentences, she put Germany and Japan into the subject of a verb, regardless of whether the verb was active or passive:

By March of 1945, the Axis nations had been essentially defeated; all that remained was a final, but bloody, climax. The borders of Germany had been breached, and both Germany and Japan were being bombed around the clock. Neither country, though, had been so devastated that it could not resist.

If, however, she had wanted to write about the end of the war from the point of view of the Allied nations, she would have chosen the active:

By March of 1945, the Allies had essentially defeated the Axis nations; all that remained was a final, but bloody, climax. American, French, and British forces had breached the borders of Germany and were bombing both Germany and Japan around the clock. But they had not so thoroughly devastated either country as to destroy its ability to resist.

The Institutional Passive

When we try to revise passives in official and academic prose, we often run into a problem, because many editors and teachers believe that a passage such as the following is stylistically improper:

This paper is concerned with two problems. How can we best handle, in a transformational grammar (i) Restrictions . . . To illustrate (i), we may cite . . . we shall show . . .

Certainly, scholars in different fields write in different ways. And in all fields, some scholarly writers and editors resolutely avoid the first person everywhere. But if they claim that all good academic writing in all fields must always be impersonally third-person, always passive, they are wrong.

Summing Up

1. Express actions and conditions in specific verbs, adverbs, or adjectives:

The intention of the committee is the improvement of morale.

The committee intends to improve morale.

2. When appropriate, make the subjects of your verbs characters involved in those actions:

A decision on the part of the Dean about funding by the Department of its program must be made for there to be adequate staff preparation.

If the staff is to prepare adequately, the Dean must decide whether the Department will fund the program.

We can sum up these principles in the diagram we offered last month.

FIXED	SUBJECT	VERB	COMPLEMENT
VARIABLE	CHARACTERS	ACTION	—

To the degree that we consistently express the crucial actions of our story in verbs and our central characters (real or abstract) in subjects, our readers are likely to feel our prose is clear and direct. This, however, is only the first step toward clear, direct, and coherent writing. ■

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