

Bring your writing to life: Use recognizable characters and action verbs

BY IAN LEWENSTEIN

Legal writing shares with officialese and bureaucratese an affinity for abstractitis¹ — a malady that robs prose of its vitality and clarity. This kind of writing clouds a writer’s message by stuffing it with zombie nouns (abstract nouns where a strong verb should be), weak verbs (such as forms of *to be*), and passive voice. Abstractitis has been addressed in this column before,² but it’s so pervasive and deadly that it deserves another pass.

ABSTRACT NOUNS AND HIDDEN ACTION

Abstractitis begins with missing characters, abstract nouns, and hidden action.

1. It was found that the initiation of the lawsuit was not done in a timely manner.
2. The judge ruled the lawsuit untimely.

In #1, we find no recognizable characters, a zombie noun (*initiation*), and passive voice. But in #2, we provide a character (*judge*) and active voice paired with an action verb (*ruled*).

Abstractitis flourishes when we neglect to name recognizable characters in the subjects of sentences: we then confuse our readers,³ who look for action and crave characters that they can recognize as capable of acting; recognizable characters and action verbs combine to produce clear, direct, and readable prose.⁴

Take another example (to be discussed later) in which the writer discarded commonly recognizable characters and used abstract nouns instead of verbs to express crucial actions: “The project scope is the broad features and functions of the new comment portal.” *Project scope* isn’t a concrete, recognizable character. The verb is lifeless. And now the reader is confused and, unless required by circumstances, unlikely to read on.

ABSTRACTITIS ABOUNDS

The following example comes from an email that I and other Minnesota rule writers received from an administrative agency, the Office of Administrative Hearings. OAH oversees Minnesota rulemaking, which includes managing an online portal at which the public can comment on an agency’s proposed administrative rule. OAH is developing a new portal — I think:

The **project scope** is the broad features and functions of the new comment portal. **This scope statement** provides a common understanding of the project scope among all project stakeholders and describes the project’s major objectives. **It** also enables the project team to perform more detailed planning, guides the project team’s work during execution, and provides the baseline for evaluating whether requests for changes or additional work are contained within or outside the project’s boundaries.

This is different from requirements, which specify in detail the capabilities, features or attributes of the new system. **Stakeholder needs, wants and wishes** are gathered and assessed to derive the requirements. **Requirements** are prioritized to determine which requirements are must-haves, could-haves, or nice-to-haves. **Requirements gathering** is the next step in the project. There will be numerous **opportunities** for engagement across the enterprise to gather requirements.

In boldface are the characters in the subject position; in two of the sentences in the second paragraph, passive voice results in no characters at all. Without any characters, readers are stripped of critical information that tells them who or what is acting. Who is gathering and assessing? Who is prioritizing? Readers are left with nettlesome abstractions. Welcome to abstractitis.

THE FIX

To eliminate the fuzziness, start by identifying each sentence’s subject and then rework the sentences, using identifiable characters in the subject position. Because OAH maintains the comment portal, OAH is a suitable character. Next, we must rewrite the sentence to place OAH (we in this instance) as a character in the subject position.

Let’s try the first paragraph, first sentence (#1 in the chart below). The revision (#2) is a bit longer, but it fixes the original’s limpness.

Language	Characters – verbs
1. The project scope <u>is</u> the broad features and functions of the new comment portal.	Character in subject position: Project scope – is
2. In our project statement, we <u>describe</u> our goals for a new comment portal and how we <u>seek</u> to build a better one.	Character in subject position: We – describe, seek

In the next sentence, let’s continue using OAH as the character.

Language	Characters – verbs
1. This scope statement <u>pro-</u> <u>vides</u> a common understanding of the project scope among all project stakeholders and <u>describes</u> the project’s major objectives.	Character in subject position: Scope statement – provides, describes Other character: stakeholders
2. We <u>explain</u> why we—together with state agencies —are developing a new portal and <u>outline</u> our main goals for the portal.	Character in subject position: We – explain, outline Other character and concrete noun: state agencies, portal

The original uses action verbs, but *project scope* could be more concrete. Ostensibly, the new comment portal is the project. Just say *comment portal* or *portal*.

So far, we’ve identified the main character as OAH (we)—plus a few recognizable nouns that don’t act but are important to the reader (*project statement*, *portal*). Now the third sentence.

Language	Characters – verbs
1. It also <u>enables</u> the project team to <u>perform</u> more detailed planning, <u>guides</u> the project team’s work during execution, and <u>provides</u> the baseline for evaluating whether requests for changes or additional work are contained within or outside the project’s boundaries.	Character in subject position: It – enables, perform, guides, provides Other character and concrete nouns: project team, work, requests
2. We <u>use</u> our project statement to <u>help</u> us: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>plan</u> and <u>guide</u> our work on the portal; and • <u>decide</u> how to respond to agency suggestions. 	Character in subject position: We – use, help, plan, guide, decide Concrete nouns: statement, work, portal, suggestions

Compare the original to the revision. Note how the characters are paired with strong verbs, resulting in a smoother flow. Not perfect, but a definite improvement.

Original	Revised
The project scope is the broad features and functions of the new comment portal. This scope statement provides a common understanding of the project scope among all project stakeholders and describes the project’s major objectives. It also enables the project team to perform more detailed planning, guides the project team’s work during execution, and provides the baseline for evaluating whether requests for changes or additional work are contained within or outside the project’s boundaries.	In our project statement, we describe our goals for a new comment portal and how we seek to build a better one. We explain why we—together with state agencies—are developing a new portal and outline our main goals for the portal. We use our project statement to help us: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • plan and guide our work on the portal; and • decide how to respond to agency suggestions.

Readers want recognizable characters and action verbs, not the misery of abstractitis. Write accordingly if you expect your reader to easily understand you.

Your

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Note to readers: Take a stab at rewriting the second paragraph from the example. Substitute recognizable characters in the subject position and use action verbs. See what you come up with and submit your revision to me at lewe0039@umn.edu. I'll send you a rewrite to compare with yours. Have at it.



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ENDNOTES

1. Garner, *Garner's Modern English Usage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 5th ed, 2022), pp 11–12.
2. Garner, *Eliminate Zombie Nouns and Minimize Passive Voice*, 98 Mich B J 34 (December 2019); Schiess, *Editing for Concision*, 95 Mich B J 34 (December 2016); Williams, *An Excerpt from Style: Toward Clarity and Grace (Part Two)*, 71 Mich B J 196 (1992); Williams, *An Excerpt from Style: Toward Clarity and Grace (Part One)*, 71 Mich B J 71 (1992); Wing, *Where's the Verb?*, 68 Mich B J 150 (1989).
3. Williams, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
4. Williams & Bizup, *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, 5th ed, 2015), p 13.

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