

Where's the Verb?

By F. Georgann Wing

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Think back to the second grade when we first learned to write sentences. We used strong verbs, and our sentences were crisp and precise. We identified who did what, and the sentences were filled with action.

I like to smell a flower.

In our high school English and writing courses, our writing got sophisticated:

I like the sweet fragrance of a daffodil.

Our writing was still clear and precise because we still used verbs and said who did what.

Then we went to college, where we learned to write in an academic way. We were told to expand our thoughts and our writing. So we wrote three-page themes about Wordsworth's "host of golden daffodils." We were told to use big words instead of little words so we would sound educated. We complied by changing little verbs to big nouns. Our sentences were longer, so it was easier to fill the pages when we had nothing much to say. Thus, in a bad moment we wrote:

The emanation of the pervasive aroma of the daffodil effectively creates stimulation of the olfactory nerves.

The sentence was longer, the words were bigger, and the reader, no doubt, knew the writer was educated. We had mastered academic writing. We

merely changed verbs to nouns derived from them, and everything else fell into place. We found that it was easier to write, because we did not have to be specific. Our sentences were very grammatical, even though we omitted the who's, when's, where's, and why's. So in answer to the quip, "Where's the verb?"—it has gone by way of the academic abstract.

For clarity and force, we now need to get back to basics. We must draft contracts and write briefs so our readers understand the specifics. The most important rules are these:

- 1) Use strong base verbs instead of derivative nouns, and
- 2) State them in the active voice.

Use Base Verbs

Strong sentences require strong base verbs, words that tell what people do. Offerors revoke. Attorneys represent. Verbs breathe life and action into the sentences. Lose them and the sentences are dead.

So beware of these word endings:

-ment, -ion, -ance, -ence, -ancy, -ency, -ant, -ent, -al.

Too often they signal a verb gone wrong, mashed into a derivative noun.

Don't use:	Use:
<i>reliance</i>	<i>rely</i>
<i>revocation</i>	<i>revoke</i>
<i>pertinence</i>	<i>pertain</i>
<i>tendency</i>	<i>tend</i>
<i>statement</i>	<i>state</i>

As Professor Richard Wydick points out in *Plain English for Lawyers*, "[B]ase verbs are simple creatures. They cannot tolerate adornment. If you try to

dress them up, you squash their life and motion."

Compare the sentences that follow, and notice the problems that derivative nouns create. (The problems are not as pronounced in these sentences, because they are short. When the sentences are longer, the problems are compounded, destroying clarity and precision.)

A. Sentences built around derivative nouns are often longer than need be. It simply takes more words to hold the sentence together.

There has been a revocation of our offer.

We revoke our offer.

The conclusion that I have reached is that the terms of the contract are fair.

I have concluded that the terms of the contract are fair.

B. The writer has to settle for a weaker, often awkward, verb to carry the larger noun. Nouny sentences thrive on awkward verbs—like "effectuated" or "affix" or other junk verbs.

Service of process has been effectuated.

We have served the summons and complaint.

Please affix your signature to the contract.

Please sign the contract.

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C. Nouny sentences often omit people. We cannot grammatically say, "we reliance," or "we modification." Thus, the writer simply omits the actor, and the sentence is at least grammatically sound. But when the writer omits people from the sentence, ambiguities are created.

There was reliance on the contract that you breached.

We relied on the contract that you breached.

At times, one can only guess whom the writer intended the characters to be.

If there could be a presentation of evidence that would demonstrate that false representations were made on the loan application, then there could be a conviction.

If the prosecutor (?) could present evidence that (?) falsely represented on the loan application that (?), then the prosecutor (?) would have enough evidence to convict ?

When the writer uses derivative nouns instead of verbs, the reader must mentally fill in the blanks. Verbs force the writer to be specific, to state who did what. The writing is more understandable and therefore more persuasive. Look the reader in the eye and say what is on your mind.

State the Verb in the Active Voice

Good writing begins with strong sentences. Strong sentences begin with base verbs stated in the active voice, not the passive voice. Although derivative nouns and passive voice go hand in hand, they are separate faults. A writer can be very careful to use base verbs, yet still write bad sentences in the passive voice.

In the active voice, the subject of the verbs acts.

The defendant struck the plaintiff.

This sentence focuses on the logical subject, on who did it. Now suppose you wrote it in the passive voice.

The plaintiff was struck by the defendant.

Here the actor is the object of the verb, not the subject. The focus is on the act, rather than the actor. Now the reader must read the entire sentence before learning who did it.

Many writers mistakenly believe that passive voice and past tense are the same. They are not. The writer can use the passive voice in any tense.

The return was audited by IRS.

The return is being audited by IRS.

The return will be audited by IRS.

Sentences in the passive voice create some of the same problems as derivative nouns create. Again, the problems are not as pronounced in the sentences that follow because they are short.

A. Sentences in the passive voice require more words. To help the passive verb, the writer must add weak supporting verbs or prepositions such as: be, was/were, had been/will have been, of, by.

The plaintiff's petition for rehearing was denied by the court.

The court denied the plaintiff's petition for rehearing.

B. The structure of sentences in the passive voice is often awkward.

It was contended by the defendant that he should be allowed credit for the money that was received by the plaintiff.

The defendant contended that he should be allowed credit for the money that plaintiff received.

C. Because the sentence is complete without an actor, the writer may simply forget him. A sentence without an actor is truncated and may be ambiguous.

Funds for the new library will be allocated. (By whom?)

The city will allocate the funds for the new library.

D. The reader may have double trouble when the writer combines the passive voice with derivative nouns.

There will be an allocation of funds. (By whom; for what?)

The contention was made that allowance should be given for the moneys that were received.

The analysis of the basis for such an action in terms of a recognition of the foreseeable harm and proximate cause associated with the negligence in the sale of alcohol implies a strong policy basis for a favorable decision. (Mumbo jumbo.)

But, you say, passive voice and derivative nouns must serve some purpose. If not, God and our college professors would not have invented them! True enough, but use them consciously, and only in special circumstances.

Consider Using the Passive Voice and Derivative Nouns When:

A. It doesn't matter who did it. Sometimes you don't need to identify the actor because no one wants to know.

The complaint and summons were served. (Who cares who did it?)

B. The reader already knows who did it. Then the writer might use the passive voice and derivative nouns to add a little variety.

The Michigan Plain English Law was finally enacted. (Only the Legislature could do that.)

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The teachers met to vote on whether to ratify the contract. After much debate, it was ratified. (Passive sentences often follow active sentences.)

C. The writer doesn't know who did it.

She was murdered.

D. The writer knows who did it but is in a sticky situation and doesn't want to say. So the writer simply passes the buck linguistically and keeps the reader in the dark.

The land was conveyed.

E. The writer did it and doesn't want to say so. The writer isn't comfortable looking the reader in the eye and taking responsibility for the action. Government officials and judges often use this method to avoid taking responsibility for their decisions.

A decision has been made to terminate all ADC payments.

A judge who has decided to award the marital home to the husband might say something like this:

The equities demand that the marital home be awarded to the husband.

Otherwise, the judge would have to look the wife in the eye and give her the bad news:

Mrs. Smith, you are a jerk. You have abused your husband since the day you were married, and you are lazy to boot. I've decided that you don't deserve the marital home. I'm awarding it to your husband.

Indeed, such a clear statement might better be cloaked in the abstract.

So take control of your writing. Don't use derivative nouns or passive voice because you think you sound more educated or because it is habit. Use these academic obscurities when you need them—in a sticky situation, or when you don't know the particulars. But in most sentences use strong base verbs in the active voice. It works.