

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

By Joseph M. Williams

This month and next, we offer an excerpt from one of the most influential of all the recent books on writing. It has been highly acclaimed by professional writers, teachers of writing, and commentators. The book originated as *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, published as a textbook by Scott, Foresman. Professor Williams has now prepared a revised version for use outside the classroom. It is called *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* and is published by the University of Chicago Press.

You will profit from this book. It is rich in detail and example, grounded in research, and refreshingly well-balanced. It teaches a system of principles for clarity, coherence, emphasis, and concision—all with a view to how easily the reader will comprehend, but without losing sight of style. The subtitle is perfect: *Toward Clarity and Grace*.

—JK

Finding a Useful Language: Some First Steps

How might we describe the difference between these two sentences?

1a. *Because we knew nothing about local conditions, we could not determine how effectively the committee had allocated funds to areas that most needed assistance.*

1b. *Our lack of knowledge about local conditions precluded determination of committee action effectiveness in fund allocation to those areas in greatest need of assistance.*

Most of us would call the style of (1a) clearer, more concise than the style of (1b). We would probably call (1b) turgid, indirect, unclear, unreadable, passive, confusing, abstract, awkward, opaque, complex, impersonal, wordy, prolix, obscure, inflated. But when we use *clear* for one and *turgid* for the other, we do not describe sentences on the page; we describe how we feel about them. Neither *awkward* nor *turgid* are on the page. Turgid and awkward refer to a bad feeling behind my eyes.

It is at this point that we need a second vocabulary, one that will help us explain what it is that makes us want to call a passage turgid, a vocabulary that also suggests how we can revise it. In this chapter, we're going to discuss the particular kind of unclarity that we feel in (1b), the kind of sentences that feel gummy, lumpy, abstract; the kind of sentences that—depending on their subject matter—we variously characterize as academese, legalese, medicalese, bureaucratese.

The First Two Principles of Clear Writing

Readers are likely to feel that they are reading prose that is clear and direct when

(1) the subjects of the sentences name the cast of characters, and

(2) the verbs that go with those subjects name the crucial actions those characters are part of.

Look again at (1b):

1b. *Our lack of knowledge about local conditions precluded determination of committee action effectiveness in fund*

allocation to those areas in greatest need of assistance.

Who are the characters? If we were to cast this sentence as a play, how many parts would we have to fill? There is "we" (in the form of *our*); there is "the committee" (are they also "we"?); and there are "areas." But where in (1b) do those characters appear? *Our* is not a subject, but a modifier of *lack*: our lack. *Committee* is not a subject, but another modifier: committee action effectiveness. And *areas* is not a subject either, but the object of a preposition: to areas. What is the subject of (1b)? An abstraction: *Our lack of knowledge*, followed by its vague verb *precluded*.

Now look at (1a):

1a. *Because we knew nothing about local conditions, we could not determine how effectively the committee had allocated funds to areas that most needed assistance.*

We is the subject of both *knew* and *could not determine*:

Because we knew nothing . . . , we could not determine

The committee is subject of the verb *had targeted*:

the committee had targeted.

"Plain Language" is a regular feature of the **Michigan Bar Journal**, edited by Joseph Kimble for the State Bar Plain English Committee. Assistant editor is George H. Hathaway. Through this column the Committee hopes to promote the use of plain English in the law. Want to contribute a plain English article? Contact Prof. Kimble at Thomas Cooley Law School, P.O. Box 13038, Lansing, MI 48901.

And although *area* is still the object of a preposition (*to areas*), it is also the subject of *needed*:

areas that most needed assistance.

Sentence (1b) consistently violates the first principle: use subjects to name characters; sentence (1a) consistently observes it.

Consider how those two sentences name the actions those characters perform. In the first, the actions are not verbs, but rather abstract nouns: *lack, knowledge, determination, action, allocation, assistance, need*. The second consistently names those actions in verbs: *we knew nothing, we could not determine, the committee allocated, areas needed*. The only action still a noun is *assistance*. So the first sentence violates not only our first principle: name characters in subjects; it violates the second as well: express crucial actions in verbs. And again, the second sentence observes both principles. The real difference between those sentences, then, lies not in

their numbers of syllables or words, but in where the writer placed the characters and expressed their actions.

The principle also gives us some simple advice about revising. Run a line under the first five or six words of every sentence. If you find that (1) you have to go more than six or seven words into a sentence to get past the subject to the verb and (2) the subject of the sentence is not one of your characters, take a hard look at that sentence; its characters and actions probably do not align with subjects and verbs. (If you want to do a more exact and thorough analysis, underline the subject of every verb, even those in subordinate clauses.) Then simply revise the sentence so that characters appear as subjects and their actions as verbs.

Some readers may think that I am simply giving the standard advice about avoiding passive verbs. As we'll see, that's not bad advice, but nothing we have seen so far has anything directly to do with passive verbs. The bad example "feels" passive, but that feeling does not arise from passive verbs but rather from abstract nouns and missing characters.

Some Stylistic Consequences

We begin with these two principles—characters as subjects and their actions as verbs—because they have so many unexpected but welcome consequences:

- You may have been told to write more specifically, more concretely.

When we turn verbs into nouns and then delete the characters, we fill a sentence with abstraction:

There has been an affirmative decision for program termination.

When we use subjects to name characters and verbs to name their actions, we write sentences that are specific and concrete.

The Director decided to terminate the program.

- You may have been told to avoid using too many prepositional phrases.

An evaluation of the program by us will allow greater efficiency in service to clients.

While it is not clear what counts as "too many," it is clear that when we use verbs instead of abstract nouns, we can also eliminate most of the prepositional phrases. Compare,

We will evaluate the program so that we can serve clients better.

- You may have been told to put your ideas in a logical order.

When we turn verbs into nouns and then string them through prepositional phrases, we can confuse the logical sequence of the actions. This series of actions distorts the "real" chronological sequence:

The closure of the branch and the transfer of its business and nonunionized employees constituted an unfair labor practice because the purpose of obtaining an economic benefit by means of discouraging unionization motivated the closure and transfer.

When we use subjects to name characters and verbs to name their actions, we are more likely to match our syntax to the logic of our story:

The partners committed an unfair labor practice when they closed the branch and transferred its business and nonunionized employees in order to discourage unionization and thereby obtain an economic benefit.

- You may have been told to use connectors to clarify logical relationships:

The more effective presentation of needs by other Agencies resulted in our failure in acquiring federal funds, despite intensive lobbying efforts on our part.

When you turn nouns into verbs, you have to use logical operators like *because, although, and if* to link the new sequences of clauses.

Although we lobbied Congress intensively, we could not acquire federal funds because other interests presented their needs more effectively.

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• You may have been told to write short sentences.

In fact, there is nothing wrong with a long sentence if its subjects and verbs match its characters and actions. But even so, when we match subjects and verbs with characters and actions, we almost always write a shorter sentence. Compare the original and revised sentences we've looked at so far.

In short, when you observe this first pair of principles, you reap other benefits. Once you grasp the two root principles, you can apply them quickly, knowing that as you correct one problem, you are solving others. When you align subjects and characters, verbs and actions, you turn abstract, impersonal, apparently expository prose into a form that feels much more like a narrative, into something closer to a story.

I should clarify an often misunderstood point: Clear writing does not require Dick-and-Jane sentences. Almost

all of the revisions are shorter than the originals, but the objective is not curtness. What counts is not the number of words in a sentence, but how easily we get from beginning to end while understanding everything in between.

As we might expect, the principles of aligning characters with subjects and actions with verbs have exceptions. We

will see later how we must choose *which* character from among many to make the subject and *which* action to make the verb. At this point, though, we can represent our two principles simply and graphically:

FIXED	SUBJECT	VERB	COMPLEMENT
VARIABLE	CHARACTERS	ACTION	—

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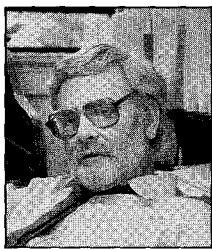
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Joseph M. Williams is Professor of English and Linguistics at the University of Chicago. He is also a visiting faculty member at the National Judicial College at the University of Nevada-Reno and has

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.