1 Concision

CONCISION, leanness of words, is a natural place to begin because wordiness is so common in student writing and because (unlike losing weight) being concise isn't really so hard. It usually works by process of elimination: we watch what we say, ask ourselves whether what we've said is essential to what we mean, and eliminate what isn't. The real work is often figuring out what exactly we wanted to say in the first place. But trying to be concise helps with that too—by helping us see what we don't mean.

Concision can add remarkable grace to our prose. It also makes our prose easier to read and understand. Yet many of us are afraid of writing concisely because doing so can make us feel exposed. Concision leaves us fewer words to hide behind. Our insights and ideas might appear puny stripped of those inessential words, phrases, and sentences in which we rough them out. We might even wonder, were we to cut out the fat, would anything be left? It's no wonder, then, that many students make little attempt to be concise—may, in fact, go out of their way not to be—and so often couple this strategy with a style just as mistaken. Though you can certainly be wordy without writing pompously—and the other way around—the two go hand in hand so often that it's useful to consider them together. Here's how lots of students think they have to write in college:

> Prospero is faced with the necessity of deciding whether to accept forgiveness for the actions of his brother or remain in a state of hostility.
>
> It is evident that interpersonal conflict is responsible for many organizational problems experienced by businesses.
>
> The role of women in households in medieval Europe was arrayed across a number of possibilities of increasing or decreasing activity and independence, depending on variables such as status, wealth, religion, or region.

That's the collegiate pompous style in action: big words, self-important phrasing, a flat tone, long gobs of prepositional phrases, nouns galore, and abuse of the passive voice—all of it run up the flag pole to see if the powers that be will salute.

The pompous style spreads like crabgrass, and can be as hard to root out. Here's a legal sentence crafted in classic pompous style, from Maryland's *Annotated Code of Laws:*

> Any investigation, inquiry, hearing, or examination which the Board is empowered by law to hold or undertake may be held or undertaken by or before the majority of the members of the Board or its secretary, and the finding or order of members of the Board or the representative, when concurred in by the majority of the members of the Board, shall have the same force and effect as the finding or order of the whole Board. (Article 56, Section 497). (77 words)

This sentence is a parade of legalese. And even if we don't understand it, its gassiness is almost reassuring—this is what we've come to expect "the law" to sound and feel like. But here's the same code, revised when the state, in a temporary fit of sanity, decided to make its laws intelligible to ordinary people (Hackett 1989, B1):

> A majority of the members then serving on the Board is a quorum. (13 words)

The result is an 83 percent reduction in length. It took courage to get rid of those twenty-dollar words like *empowered, finding,* and *concurred.* But now we have a sentence that is much easier to read. It sounds strange to us, perhaps—aren't laws supposed to sound like, well, laws? But if one imagines the thousands of laws, the book upon book of legal code, that could be simplified and compressed, one is likely to agree that from a citizen's perspective this is a vast improvement. (It is not incidental that the most enduring laws in Western culture, the Ten Commandments, are expressed in a succinct, lapidary style.)

Here's another example, from a different professional setting but with no less pomposity. This is a technical manual for programmers revising a corporate computer system:

> To ensure that the new system being developed, or the existing system being modified, will provide users with the timely, accurate, and complete information they require to properly perform their functions and responsibilities, it is necessary to assure that the new or modified system will cover all necessary aspects of the present automated or manual systems being replaced. To gain this assurance, it is essential that documentation

> be made of the entities of the present systems which will be modified or eliminated. (82 words)

This passage displays the same faults as the legal sentence. Its writer tries to convey its importance by stamping pretentious words all over it and piling on the verbiage. But the passage lulls the reader to sleep and thus defeats the point of writing in the first place. Bold pruning yields this core meaning:

> Make sure to document all planned changes so any mistakes you make can be corrected. (15 words)

Another 80 percent reduction in length. As with the legal sentence, the revision may sound less important (though that *mistakes you make* might catch the attention of those programmers who hold the future of the company in their hands). But it has lost not a shred of meaning. (That might be easier to see if we keep in mind that this instruction would occur in the context of a wider discussion of the computer system and planned changes.) If you're not sure the revision is really an improvement, consider what it would be like to read through page after page of the original. You'd go to sleep. Now conduct the same thought-experiment with the revision, and ask yourself which version you'd rather read.

The Pompous Style at School

College students begin their training in the pompous style innocently enough, with sentences like this:

> To satisfy her hunger for nutrition, she ate the bread.

Once you've decided to write in a formal tone, stilted phrases like *hunger for nutrition* arise almost automatically. But the sentence's tone is just too weighty for its message. Simplifying makes the sentence shorter and stronger:

> She was hungry, so she ate the bread.

In the following instances, see if you can figure out what gets changed or cut to go from pompous to plain prose:

Pompous Original	Plain Revision
It was discussed in this reading that . . .	Tannen argues that . . .
The scene is very important because it helps us understand Cleopatra early on in the play.	This early scene helps us understand Cleopatra.
In the play, Menas, who is a pirate, says this about the marriage: "I think the policy of that purpose made more in the marriage than the love of the parties" (2.6.115–6).	The pirate Menas dismisses the marriage as a political arrangement.
The film and video industry category can specifically be broken down into subsequent industries of motion picture and videotape production, motion picture and videotape distribution, movie houses, and cable and other pay-television services.	The film and video industry category consists of production, distribution, movie houses, and cable and other pay-television services.
Some of AOL Time Warner's major media competitors include News Corporation Ltd, which is a global media and entertainment media power located in Australia, and Viacom Inc., which is based in the United States and is one of the world's leading media companies.	AOL Time Warner's major global media competitors include Australia-based News Corporation Ltd and U.S.-based Viacom Inc.

Do you see any patterns in the revisions? There's a hefty reduction in the total number of words. About 70 percent of the words in the original passages have been eliminated. But how does one decide what to cut? Here are some of the structural changes that make these revisions more concise: the verbs have gotten stronger (fewer linking verbs and less passive voice, and more active verbs in the active voice); adjective phrases and clauses have been pushed into short adjectives that precede

nouns; some adverbs have been cut; repetitive words and phrases have been squeezed together with tricks like parallelism; and a difficult quotation has been paraphrased. These structural changes have moved the writing away from the pompous style and toward a more concise, vigorous, verb-centered style.

Later we'll look closer at some of these techniques. For now, let's focus on gaining the skill and confidence to pluck out empty modifiers. The pompous style prefers description over action, so it bristles with adjectives and adverbs. A useful step in unlearning the pompous style is to hunt for modifiers that add little or nothing:

Original	Revision
Women held an important place in ~~social~~ society.	Women held an important place in society.
Capitalism is accompanied by the ideal of freedom ~~as something to be attained~~.	Capitalism is accompanied by the ideal of freedom.

An *ideal* is, by definition, *something to be attained.*

But sometimes a student resists cutting empty words because they seem to add important information. What do you think about the following cut?

Original	Revision
~~From a political-institutional point of view,~~ the Federalist Papers were the first full formulation of federalism as a theory.	The Federalist Papers were the first full formulation of federalism as a theory.

Political-institutional is the kind of claptrap that makes the pompous style so tempting for inexperienced writers. It sounds weighty but adds nothing. The "point of view," whatever that means here, is obvious from the content of the sentence—especially if we remember that this sentence will be read in its context, as part of an exploration of the topic.

Another example:

Original	Revision
These are the practical ~~contingency management~~ implications:	These are the practical implications:

If we imagine the context, plainly this sentence occurs within a larger discussion in which the topic, *contingency management,* has already been introduced (otherwise the use of the phrase in this sentence would make no sense). The topic's repetition here blunts the energy of a sturdy little sentence.

When a student is wise enough to use a good verb, intensifying adverbs often backfire:

Original	Revision
Euthyphro continues to ~~further~~ justify his actions.	Euthyphro continues to justify his actions.
The play ~~carefully~~ examines the disorder brought by civil war.	The play examines the disorder brought by civil war.

These adverbs add nothing to the already strong verbs. They are just traces of the pompous style in otherwise good sentences. Keep in mind Mark Twain's advice: "Substitute *damn* every time you're inclined to write *very;* your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be."

Since adverbs often prop up weak verbs, sometimes cutting an adverb will push the writer to choose a stronger verb:

Original	Revision
Antony plays on the crowd's emotions and successfully obtains their support.	Antony plays on the crowd's emotions and wins their support.

Here the writer, trying to fix the problem of an unhelpful modifier, realized that the solution was to put the sentence's key action into its verb:

Original	Revision
Socrates convincingly explains his position to Crito.	Socrates convinces Crito that it would be unjust to flee. / Eventually, Socrates convinces Crito.

Socrates convinces Crito by itself would be a bit abrupt, so the writer's next step was to decide how to add enough value to the sentence to make it read well. Two possibilities are shown.

Wordiness, as we've seen, is often tied to other problems, and the effort to make one's writing concise often brings about other improvements.

Consider this opening paragraph of a student essay about the Italian Renaissance political thinker Machiavelli:

> Machiavelli best supports republics in *The Discourses.* His favorite republic is ancient Rome. He explains and supports his admiration in this work. The two major aspects that Machiavelli discusses are that the Romans were a great empire and that they had a powerful army. (44 words)

Right away the reader stumbles over *best supports*. What does it mean to say that Machiavelli supports republics? And why say *best,* a word that implies a comparison? As is often true of unclear writing, its writer has good ideas but hasn't yet succeeded in articulating them. The first of these is that Machiavelli praises republics in a book entitled *The Discourses.* The revision will build on this plainer verb, *praises*. The writer's second idea, only hinted at in that distracting word *best,* is that Machiavelli's praise of republics in *The Discourses* differs from his perspective in his other famous book, *The Prince,* where he seems to prefer monarchies. (We'd only know this in context, so to speak—if we were along for the ride with that student—but bear with me.) Mulling over ways to bring out this second point, the writer realizes she can skip it because it's not the point of her essay:

Original	Revision 1	Revision 2
Machiavelli best supports republics in *The Discourses.*	Machiavelli best praises republics in *The Discourses.*	Machiavelli praises republics in *The Discourses.*

There's still work to do. Look back at the original paragraph. The transitions between sentences are weak, and the third sentence adds little to the first. Here's the revised paragraph:

> Machiavelli praises republics in *The Discourses.* Above all he praises the Roman republic, because it had a powerful army, and conquered and held a vast empire. (26 words)

The revision is 40 percent shorter. It keeps the same ideas (except for cutting the abortive contrast with *The Prince*) but expresses them with strong verbs (*praises, had, conquered,* and *held*) and good links (*Above all* and *because*).

Finally, note that the revision orders and expands the argument. The original version listed as *major aspects* (whatever that means) that Rome was an empire and had a strong army. The revision reverses the order of these items, since a strong army is what allowed Rome to gain its empire. And while the original says merely that the Romans *were* a great empire, the revision turns this identity into actions, *conquered* and *held.*

Here's a student trying to cram too many ideas into too small a space:

> *Alien 3* is a fast-paced, emotionally tense film composed of a vast array of symbols and meanings which reflect the political debates concerning women's reproductive rights in 1990s America. (29 words)

The idea is a good one, but the sentence, running without a pause, is too long for easy reading (pauses help readers make it through long sentences). And some of the verbiage veers into pomposity—a windy, hackneyed phrase like *vast array* should be a red flag. The solution is to cut to the core of the argument:

> *Alien 3* is a powerful allegory of the 1990s American debate about women's reproductive rights. (15 words)

The revision is half as long. Note how the windy *composed of a vast array of symbols and meanings* is captured and even sharpened in a single well-chosen word, *allegory. Emotionally tense* comes from the same pompous-style tendency: tension *is* emotional by definition, so *emotionally tense* is redundant. *Powerful,* the revision's choice of adjective, is vaguer and broader than *fast-paced* and *tense,* but that's a good choice here, where we want to focus the reader's attention on that key word *allegory.*

Note the mock profundity of this example from a marketing paper:

> The company uses specific determination methods to make distinctions between customer segments. (12 words)

Specific, as used above, is a favorite pompous-style word, a vague term masquerading as a concrete one. And the gassy *uses specific determination methods to make distinctions* can be compressed into one word:

> The company distinguishes between customer segments.

This is much better, but the revision isn't complete. It feels bare and overly general. The writer should provide more information to make the sentence feel full enough:

> The company distinguishes between three customer segments. (7 words)

That's more like it. The sentence goes from vapid to informative—a good lesson that concision is more than many words versus few, or long versus short. Here, as so often, the challenge to be concise compels the writer to say something concrete and informative.

Now let's look at a sentence that replaces a typical pompous-style verb-swaddle with a strong verb:

Original	Revision
This secrecy becomes very damaging to Hamlet.	This secrecy cripples Hamlet.

Many students are uneasy with changes of this kind. They seem too bold. *Becomes very damaging* has a safe clinical sound, while *cripples* sounds almost rude to students schooled in the pompous style. But for anyone with an ear for English, the revision is better. It can stand by itself or serve as a frame on which to add nuance:

> This secrecy cripples Hamlet by destroying his ability to trust.

Some may protest that this kind of revision changes the meaning. I would answer that the original sentence had *already* changed the meaning—it took what was a good idea on the writer's part, and sucked the life out of it.

Concision, to sum up, may start out simple—cut the fat!—but it becomes more complicated as we work deeper into our prose. Concision represents a careful, patient process of revision in which we weigh every word and phrase and think hard about how we can better develop, organize, articulate, and refine our ideas. Most writers produce wordy first drafts. Good writers realize that sad fact and are willing to spend time tightening their prose. Concision, in other words, is more a sign of perspiration than inspiration. As Pascal wrote in 1656, "This letter is long because I didn't have time to make it shorter."

2 Clarity

MOST OF US think our writing is clearer than it really is. We know what we mean, so we see it in what we write. But good writers see their words from the reader's perspective, because clarity, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Good writers ask, "Does my reader understand the words I'm using, in the way I'm using them? Have I explained enough so that she knows what I'm talking about? Is my evidence persuasive? Have I thought about possible objections? Is there a logical arrangement to my argument that will help the reader follow it? Have I used good links and transitions to keep her pointed in the right direction?"

One problem in answering these questions is that readers differ, so there's no one standard of clear writing. A general audience, for instance, needs more background and explanation than a scholarly one. Unless you know your audience, it's impossible to be assured that what you're writing will be well-received. Most undergraduate essays should be aimed at an audience of one's better classmates unless a teacher says otherwise. Such a standard will help you decide how much to explain, what terms to define, and what tone to strike: competent, disciplined plainness.

People tend to perceive a sentence as clear when its "narrative"—generally, the story it tells or the relationship it describes—corresponds to its grammatical structure. In other words, if you wish to write clearly, begin by making your narrative's characters the subjects of sentences, and their actions and identities the predicates. Some examples:

> This process is called continental drift. Over time it has reshaped the surface of the earth.
>
> Lavoisier gave Priestley's "dephlogisticated air" its modern scientific name, oxygen.
>
> On December 11, 2001, China formally joined the World Trade Organization.
>
> Early in his career Shakespeare wrote two narrative poems.
>
> Historically, most patriarchies have institutionalized force through their legal systems. (Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*)

The basic pattern is *who* (or *what) does what.* Logical actors like *Lavoisier, China, Shakespeare,* and *patriarchies* are made grammatical subjects. (In the first example a pronoun, *it,* points back to *continental drift.*) Actions—*reshaped, gave, joined, wrote, have institutionalized*—are expressed as verbs. These sentences are clear because their grammar matches their narrative.

When a writer doesn't do this the result is likely to strike us as confusing—and sometimes even comical, as in this passage from an accident report filed with an insurance company:

> The telephone pole was approaching. I was attempting to swerve out of its way, when it struck my front end.

Trying to find something else to blame for his one-car accident, the writer gives the telephone pole a life of its own. How? By making it the grammatical subject of two active verbs, *was approaching* and *struck.* Note that you can't chalk this up to lack of skill, but to a clever, if unsuccessful, attempt to hide behind words.

The question of *who did what* is known as agency. We tend to express ourselves clearly when agency is reflected in grammar: that is, when we express agents as subjects of sentences. Muddying up the question of agency is the root cause of most unclear student writing. Consider this passage from an essay about a court case:

> A motion was requested by the defendant for the case to be dismissed on the grounds that there was a failure on the part of the prosecution to establish the facts. This was accepted by the judge, and dismissal of the case was ordered. (44 words)

True, the passage describes actions and identifies the actors. But its clunky design makes it hard to figure out who's doing what. Here's a clearer revision:

> The defendant moved to dismiss the case on the grounds that the prosecution had not established the facts. The judge agreed and dismissed the case. (25 words)

The revision is about 40 percent shorter.

who	the defendant	the prosecution	the judge
did	filed	had not established	agreed and dismissed
what	a motion	facts	the case

To answer the question *Who did what?* you'd have to take apart the original and rearrange its pieces. The grammar of the revision, by contrast, makes answering this question a breeze. The revision shows three techniques for achieving greater clarity: (1) choose verbs over nominalizations, (2) choose active verbs over linking verbs, and (3) choose the active voice over the passive voice (see Diagram 1 for help with these terms).

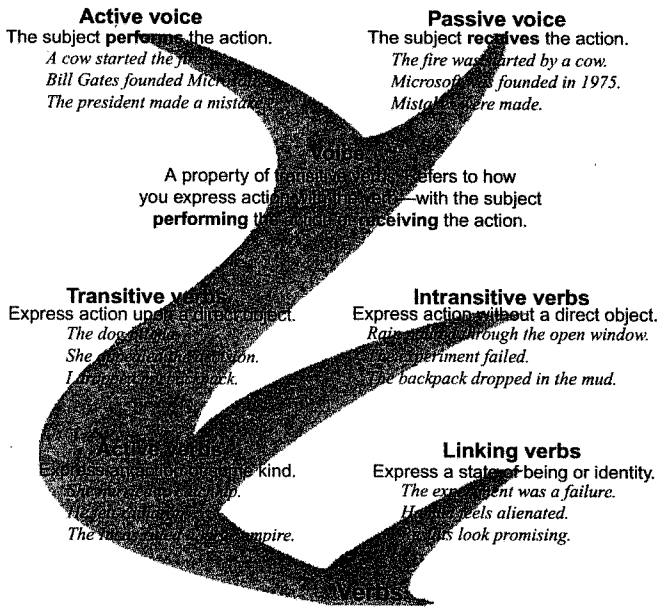

Diagram 1. A Verb Family Tree

None of these techniques should be considered an absolute rule. There are many times a good writer uses nominalizations, linking verbs, and the passive voice. But since those three elements constitute the structural core of the pompous style, and are habitually overused by college students, it's best to view them skeptically and know how to avoid them.

1. Choose Verbs over Nominalizations

A nominalization is an action expressed as a noun rather than a verb, like *analysis* or *assessment* rather than *analyze* or *assess* (some words in English, especially short words like *talk* or *work,* look the same as verbs and nouns; it's their function that counts). Nominalizations often end in *-tion* or *-ion:*

Verb	Nominalization	Verb	Nominalization
act	action	examine	examination
analyze	analysis	explain	explanation
argue	argument	fail	failure
behave	behavior	investigate	investigation
describe	description	nominalize	nominalization
dismiss	dismissal	perform	performance
distort	distortion	reveal, show	revelation

The common *-ion* endings make it easy to find nominalizations in writing, and once you start looking for them you'll find a lot, especially in formal writing—as H. W. Fowler lamented years ago:

> Turgid flabby English is full of abstract nouns; the commonest ending of abstract nouns is *-tion,* and to count the *-ion* words in what one has written . . . is one of the simplest and most effective means of making oneself less unreadable. (1983, 640)

By changing actions into nouns, nominalizations let you write sentences that don't make clear *who does what.* "Analysis," for instance, doesn't specify who's doing the analyzing. Sometimes that's okay. Consider the following:

Action in Verb	Action in Nominalization
I **did** all I could.	A full complement of **actions** was undertaken.

We **are** carefully **analyzing** the data.	A systematic **analysis** of the data is underway.

In sentences like these, which report on the scientific method, nominalizations (and their partner the passive voice) are commonly—and sensibly—used, because there is no real doubt about who is doing the actions (scientists write up their own findings). But when agency is uncertain, then nominalizations tend to make prose seem confusing or clunky, as in the following examples:

Nominalized Original	Clearer Revision
The play is an examination of the conflict the conspirators face after the assassination of Julius Caesar.	The play examines the conflict the conspirators face after they assassinate Julius Caesar.
The love Antony has for Cleopatra is much greater than any love he has for his wife.	Antony loves Cleopatra more than he loves his wife.
Assessment of his test performance showed satisfactory achievement.	He passed the test.

Another example:

Nominalized Original	Clearer Revision
Today, society witnesses the steady progress of women toward equality with their increasing presence in the working world and in government and their gradual move outside the home.	Today, society witnesses women's steady progress toward equality. Moving beyond the limits of the home, women are claiming new and increasing authority in government, business, and other traditionally male-dominated areas.

This revision divides the long string of words into two sentences, which already makes it easier to follow. It also aligns the character with the grammatical subject, by making *women* the subject of the verb in the second sentence. True, the revision is longer, but its new readability more than makes up for the added length. Concision isn't an end in itself, but a means to clarity.

2. Choose Active Verbs over Linking Verbs

Not all verbs work the same way. Active verbs convey action—*he ran, she spoke, the patient suffered a relapse.* Linking verbs convey states of being or description—*my friend is in London, she seems smart, it will be difficult.** It's natural to use linking verbs when you're defining or describing things:

> According to Kübler-Ross there are five stages of grief or dying.
>
> Poland's Solidarity was the first independent trade union in the Soviet bloc.
>
> Machiavelli's cynicism seems utterly contemporary.

So far so good. But when this grammar of identity is used to convey actions, things get ugly. When Bill Clinton was being sued for sexual harassment by Paula Jones, his attorney told the judge in the case that the president knew of an affidavit (false, as it turned out) by Monica Lewinsky, which affirmed, as the attorney put it, that "there is absolutely no sex of any kind" with the president. The linking-verb construction might sound clumsy, but it cleverly treated *sex* impersonally. The attorney—clearly a master of the pompous style—did all he could to avoid conjuring any image of the president *in flagrante delicto.* The inert linking verb also finessed the issue of timing (past or present?). President Clinton later tried to rebut an accusation of perjury by hiding behind the vagueness of this particular linking verb: "It depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is" ("The President's Testimony," 1998, B3).

That's a notorious example from sworn testimony, but linking-verb constructions make it all too easy to obscure actions in everyday speech. If the action isn't in its natural place—the verb—where is it? As you probably suspect, in a nominalization. Linking verbs and nominalizations occur together as elements of the pompous style, so replacing them in tandem tends to result in more dynamic sentences:

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* The forms of *to be* in statements like *she was running* or *my friend is studying in London* are not linking verbs, but auxiliaries that are part of compound verbs (the other part is a participle: the *-ing* forms here are present participles).

Linking-Verb Original	Active-Verb Revision
A mood of ambivalence is the main effect of the poem's language and imagery.	The poem's language and imagery evoke a mood of ambivalence.
Motion toward a light source is a behavior of *Euglena,* a single-celled organism.	*Euglena,* a single-celled organism, will move toward a light source.
There was a failure on the part of the accounting firm to engage in a thorough examination of the transactions of the company.	The accounting firm failed to examine the company's transactions carefully.

The third example shows a common trait of linking-verb sentences—a chain of prepositional phrases that makes for a plodding, monotonous rhythm:

> There was a failure
> on the part
> of the accounting firm
> to engage
> in a thorough examination
> of the transactions
> of the company.

Since the pompous style prefers nouns to verbs, it tends to overuse the prepositional phrase, that handy device for stapling nouns into sentences. When you build sentences on active verbs rather than nominalizations and linking verbs, you'll use fewer prepositional phrases. Now let's turn to the third technique for writing clearly.

3. Choose the Active Voice over the Passive Voice

Sentences written in the passive voice turn the usual narrative pattern upside down. The subject doesn't do anything—it is acted upon: *A car was stolen.* The doer of the action often drops out altogether. Before looking at abuses of the passive voice, consider some examples that make good use of it:

> The document was found in the governor's personal library.
>
> *Hamlet* was written around 1600.
>
> The particle's rate of decay was measured.

In all three of these sentences the passive voice works well (though to decide for sure we'd want to see the context and know the writer's intention). In general, the passive voice makes sense when you want to emphasize an action or its recipient and don't care about the agent. If you do want to identify the agent in the passive voice, use a prepositional phrase beginning with *by: Hamlet was written by Shakespeare around 1600.*

You can also use the passive voice to give a sentence more pizzazz by identifying the agent at the end of the sentence. In the following two-sentence sequence, for instance, the writer uses the active voice and then the passive, according to his purpose in each sentence:

> Horses, mammoths, reindeer, bison, mountain goats, lions, and a host of other mammals cascade in image along the cave walls over a distance of almost a hundred yards, over three hundred depictions in all. Delicately executed and meticulously observed, these varied and overlapping images were made by people of the late Ice Age, perhaps thirteen thousand years ago. (Ian Tattersall, *Becoming Human*)

The first sentence, with its active voice and strong verb (*cascade*), emphasizes the lively energy of the paintings. The second sentence uses the passive voice and a *by* phrase to identify the agent at the end. That lets the second sentence start where the first leaves off. If the second sentence were recast in the active voice—say, *People of the late Ice Age made these varied and overlapping images, perhaps thirteen thousand years ago*—the passage would lose much of its interest (though none of its meaning).

A classic use of the passive voice comes from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's address to Congress the day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor:

> Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.

Why the passive voice here? To reinforce FDR's argument that America had done nothing to provoke the attack. Later, the president uses the active voice in a strong parallel series to emphasize Japan's active perfidy:

> Yesterday, the Japanese government also launched an attack against Malaya.
> Last night, Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong.
> Last night, Japanese forces attacked Guam.
> Last night, Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands.
> Last night, the Japanese attacked Wake Island.
> This morning, the Japanese attacked Midway Island.

At the end, not wanting to leave his listeners with a message of their country's passivity, Roosevelt again uses the active voice—this time to assert America's unbroken resolve: "The American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory."

In sum, when Roosevelt wanted to emphasize innocence he used the passive voice. When he wanted to emphasize action he used the active voice. His masterly use of voice is the essence of good style: when *how* we say something suits *what* we say.

The passive voice has its uses, as Roosevelt's famous speech shows. But most of the time when good writers tell, describe, or explore, they reach for the active voice. If the passive voice dominates someone's style, it's a fair assumption that he or she is more interested in obscuring or ducking questions of responsibility than in frank expression. Indeed, politicians and others eager to appear contrite without actually taking responsibility cherish one particular passive construction: *Mistakes were made*. Here are some prizewinners:

> Deng: Why is there still such a big noise being made about Watergate?
> Kissinger: That is a series of almost incomprehensible events. . . . It has its roots in the fact that some mistakes were made, but also, when you change many policies, you make many, many enemies.
>
> *Secretary of State Henry Kissinger speaking with Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping (April 14, 1974)*

> The execution of these policies was flawed and mistakes were made. Let me just say it was not my intent to do business with Khomeini, to trade weapons for hostages, nor to undercut our policy of antiterrorism.
>
> *Ronald Reagan, radio broadcast (December 6, 1986)*

> Mistakes were made here by people who either did it deliberately or inadvertently. Now, others—it's up to others to decide whether those mistakes were made deliberately or inadvertently.
>
> *Bill Clinton, press conference (January 28, 1997)*

> Mistakes were made that cost my son's life and all I can say is I'm so sorry for what happened.
>
> *Brian Peterson, on trial with his girlfriend for killing their infant son, in court testimony (July 8, 1998)*

> If in hindsight we . . . discover that mistakes may have been made as regards prompt removal of priests and assistance to victims, I am deeply sorry.
>
> *Edward Cardinal Egan, Archbishop of New York, letter to parishioners on the Catholic Church's pedophilia scandal (April 20–1, 2002)*

At least the speakers of these grudging admissions chose their words carefully and, in a narrow sense, skillfully. But students tend to use the passive voice merely as a bad habit, part of the pompous style. The usual result? Turgid prose:

Passive Voice	Active Voice
The Taft-Hartley Act was also used to support the Court's decision.	The Court also cited the Taft-Hartley Act.
While reading Mill's "On Liberty," the concept of personal freedom was discussed.	In "On Liberty," Mill discusses the concept of personal freedom.
The view of the mother is displayed when Garland writes, "She didn't want to leave our home and move west."	Garland says his mother "didn't want to leave our home and move west."
It was discussed in this reading that it is important for us to understand the people with whom we work.	Smith argues that it is important to understand the people we work with.
In the novel's early chapters, a large emphasis is placed upon his pride.	The novel's early chapters emphasize his pride.

Clarity and Honesty

The three techniques we've discussed for writing clearer prose work well most of the time and will help you develop a lively style. Violating them indiscriminately will saddle your readers with lifeless, shapeless sentences littered with prepositions and ugly, boring nouns (as nominalizations—even the name is ugly—usually are). Throw in big words, and you've got the full-blown pompous style.

Some people instinctively turn to the pompous style when things get rough. Consider an example from the Bible, when Moses returns to the Israelites after he has spent forty days on the mountaintop. He's bringing the Ten Commandments, but while he's been gone all hell has broken loose. The Israelites, feeling abandoned in the wilderness, have begun worshipping a new idol that Moses' brother, Aaron, made: a golden calf. Furious, Moses smashes the Ten Commandments and turns to Aaron, who was supposed to have been in charge during his absence. What happened?, he wants to know. Where did the golden calf come from? Aaron doesn't flat-out lie, but he tries to weasel out of his role in the debacle:

> And I said unto them, Whosoever hath any gold, let them break it off. So they gave it me: then I cast it into the fire, and there came out this calf. (Exod. 32:23)

There came out this calf. I've always wondered what look Moses gave Aaron after hearing this. (The Bible doesn't say.)

A more recent example of using language the weasel way comes from Kosovo, 1999. A young Serbian man said this to an American reporter:

> We have to accept the facts. Very bad things happened in Kosovo, and we are going to pay for that. (Booth 1999, B5)

The statement starts off with a seemingly forthright acceptance of responsibility. Now comes the weaseling, starting with the no-agent agency of *very bad things happened.* But there's more: by rhetorically separating those *bad things* that happened from *we*—Serbians presumably—the sentence calls into question the legitimacy of holding that blurry *we* responsible. By the end of the statement the Serbs in Kosovo emerge not as victimizers but victims.

Human rights organizations tell us that in China (to take another example not on our doorstep), investigators routinely torture suspects during interrogation sessions. Chinese authorities don't like to admit this. Official transcripts of interrogation sessions in China thus require some reading between the lines:

> Education takes place. (Rosenthal 2000, A10)

This bland, chilling statement could be Exhibit A in how to use words to conceal and evade.

No matter the technique for doing so, writing clearly is in the end not just a matter of technique or skill but of will. "The great enemy of clear language," Orwell said, "is insincerity" (1968, 137). Clarity is an ethical imperative. It takes honesty to say what we see and think, and courage to tell the truth. The ethics of clarity hold for college students no less than for diplomats, police, soldiers, politicians, and CEOs. How you choose to speak and write in school shapes how you will act—and what you will become—later in life.