A PROBLEM AND ITS SOLUTION

At this point you can probably identify problems in someone else's writing, but you may have a harder time recognizing them in your own.

The Problem of Knowing Too Much

Most of us recognize this experience: I write something I think is clear, but when I get it back from a colleague or editor, I am told that my ideas are confusing, hard to understand. I wonder whether my critic is just being difficult, but I bite my tongue and try to fix what I am certain should have been clear to anyone who can read prose more complex than stories about My Dog Spot. And when I tell someone the same thing about his or her writing, I know that person is probably thinking the same thing about me. But almost always, I eventually realize that my readers were, in fact, right, that they recognized what was unclear better than I. How can I be right about other people's writing and so often wrong about my own?

The answer lies in this paradoxical fact: We can be wrong about the clarity of our own writing because we usually know more about our subject than do our readers, and we can be right about the clarity someone else's writing because we usually know less about its subject than does the writer.

This explains why we are so often our own worst editors: Who knows more about our subject than we do (or should)? In fact, as we re-read our own writing, we usually aren't reading; we're reminding ourselves of what we intended to mean when we wrote it. But since our readers lack our knowledge, they are likely to respond in ways that disconcert us. This also explains why two people can disagree about the quality of the same passage. Someone who understands its content is more likely to think the passage is well written than someone who knows less. Both can be right.

Ways to Sidestep Your Knowledge

Since we can never read as our readers do, we need to look at our own writing in ways that side-step our memory of what we intended

to mean when we wrote. There are three ways to do this, in increasing order of difficulty and effectiveness.

1. The quickest way is to underline the first seven or eight words of every sentence. Try revising any passage that includes more than a few sentences with these two characteristics:

   a. You have to go more than seven or eight words into a sentence before you get past its subject and verb (ignore short introductory phrases like *As a result* and *At this time*).

   b. The subject of the sentence is not a character, but an abstraction, *particularly a nominalization part of a long subject,* as in:

   Our **analysis** of the results of the experiment still did not provide an explanation of why the failure occurred.

When you find a passage with many such sentences, revise them so that the central characters in your story appear as subjects and their actions as verbs, *even if you think the passage is already clear.*

When *we* **analyzed** the results of the experiment, it still did not provide an explanation for why the failure occurred.

2. A more demanding but more reliable method: Look at the subject of *every* verb, and then try to revise those subjects that are not characters but complex nominalizations. We can take the revision we started above one more step:

   When we analyzed the results of the experiment, it still did not provide an explanation for why **the failure** occurred.

   When we analyzed the results of the experiment, it still did not provide an explanation for why *it* **failed.**

3. The most demanding method is to start by looking for any nominalizations that you can turn into verbs, especially when the verbs you have already used are general verbs like *be, make, do, have, occur,* and so on. (In a few moments, we will describe nominalizations that you should leave nominalized.):

   When we analyzed the results of the experiment, it still did not provide **an explanation** for why it failed.

   When we analyzed the results of the experiment, we still could not **explain** why it failed.

You can locate passages most likely to need this kind of revision if you remember where in your drafting you were least confident, where you felt yourself struggling because your ideas seemed so complicated. That kind of uncertainty and confusion is most likely to reveal itself in confused and confusing abstraction.

USEFUL NOMINALIZATIONS

As strongly as I have urged you to avoid nominalizations, I will now seem to contradict myself by saying that, in fact, we cannot get along without them. Nominalizations can be useful, in many contexts necessary. The trick is to know which to revise into verbs, which to keep. Keep these:

1. The nominalization is a subject that refers to a previous sentence:

   These arguments all depend on a single unproven claim.

   This decision can lead to costly consequences.

   These nominalizations link sentences into a more cohesive flow.

2. A succinct nominalization can replace an awkward "The fact that":

   The fact that she denied what he accused her of impressed the jury.

   Her denial of his accusations impressed the jury.

   But then, why not,

   When she **denied** his accusations, she **impressed** the jury.

3. A nominalization can save a few words when it names what would be the object of the verb.

   I did not satisfy her **requests.**

   I did not satisfy **what she requested.**

   This kind of nominalization also feels more concrete than the

abstract nominalization. Contrast *request* above with this sense of *request,* one that is more of an action:

> Her **request** for assistance was a surprise.
>
> When she **requested** assistance, she surprised me.

4. We often use a nominalization at the end of the first sentence of a paragraph, after a *there is/are* construction, to introduce a topic that we intend to develop in sentences that follow:

> *There is* no **need,** then, for argument about the **existence,** the **inevitability,** and the **desirability** of **change** [in language]. *There is* **need,** however, for argument about the **existence** of such a thing as good English and correct English. Let us not hesitate to assert that "The pencil was laying on the table" and "He don't know nothing" are at present incorrect no matter how many know-nothings say them. Let us insist that . . . Let us demand that . . . Let us do these things not to satisfy "rules" or to gratify the whims of a pedagogue, but rather to express ourselves clearly, precisely, logically, and directly.
>
> —Theodore M. Bernstein, *The Careful Writer*

We might consider revising those first two sentences into this:

> While we need not debate whether language changes in ways that are inevitable and desirable, we do argue that there is such a thing as good and correct English.

Some critics claim that writers should always avoid *there is/are* because such phrases are static, wordy, and often overused. In fact, they are useful at the beginning of a paragraph to introduce its central idea, an idea often captured in a nominalization.

5. Some nominalizations refer to a concept so familiar that the concept itself is almost a character.

> Few problems have so divided us 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.**

These nominalizations name familiar concepts: *abortion on demand, election, taxation, representation, Revolution.* We compress familiar concepts into nouns so that we need not repeatedly spell them out. Some nominalizations refer to ideas that we can express easily only in nominalizations: *freedom, death, love, life.* Without such abstract words, we would find it at least difficult to discuss subjects that have preoccupied us for millennia. We have to develop an eye for a nominalization that expresses one of these ideas and a 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.***

CLARITY, NOT SIMPLE-MINDEDNESS

To the degree that you can match your actions to your verbs, your readers will think that you write clearly. But to write clearly, you must not write sentences that sound as if they were written by an elementary school student. This was written by a student aspiring to academic sophistication:

> After Czar Alexander II's emancipation of Russian serfs in 1861, many newly freed peasants chose to live on communes for purposes of cooperation in agricultural production as well as for social stability. Despite some communes' attempts at economic and social equalization through the strategy of imposing low economic status on the peasants, which resulted in their reduction to near-poverty, a centuries-long history of social distinctions even among serfs prevented social equalization.

In his struggle to follow our principles, he revised that paragraph into sentences that sounded as if they were written by a precocious sixth grader:

> In 1861, Czar Alexander II emancipated the Russian serfs. Many of them chose to live on agricultural communes. There they thought they could cooperate with one another in agricultural production.

> They could also create a stable social structure. The leaders of some of these communes tried to equalize the peasants economically and socially. As one strategy, they tried to impose on all a low economic status that reduced them to near-poverty. However, the communes failed to equalize them socially. This happened because even serfs had made social distinctions among themselves for centuries.

In Lessons Eight and Ten we will look at ways to revise a series of too-short, too-simple sentences into a style that is readable but still complex enough to communicate complex ideas. Applying those principles to his primer-style passage, the student revised once more:

> After the Russian serfs were emancipated by Czar Alexander II in 1861, many chose to live on agricultural communes, hoping they could cooperate in working the land and establish a stable social structure. At first, those who led some of the communes tried to equalize the new peasants socially and economically by imposing on them all a low economic status, a strategy that reduced them to near-poverty. But the communes failed to equalize them socially because for centuries the serfs had observed social distinctions among themselves.

The first two sentences are long but clear, because the writer consistently aligned major characters with main subjects and their actions with verbs. Can we do this with every subject and every verb? Of course not. But to the degree that we can, our readers will think that we write clearly.

Exercise 3-13

Revise these sentences. At the end of each sentence is a hint.

1. The use of models in teaching prose style does not invariably result in improvements of clarity and directness. (although)
2. Precision in plotting the location of fragments of the vase enhances the possibility of accurate reconstruction. (when)
3. Any departures from the established procedures may cause delays and even termination of the program. (if)
4. A student's socialization into a field may lead to writing difficulties based on a lack of enough knowledge in regard to the construction of arguments by those in the field. (When . . . , xxxx, because. . . .)
5. The successful implementation of a new curriculum depends on the cooperation of faculty with students in setting achievable goals within a reasonable time-frame. (In order to . . . , . . .)
6. Our evaluation of the outcomes of the programs placed emphasis on objective measures despite our recognition of the low level of rater agreement. (When . . . , xxxx, even though. . . .)

Exercise 3-14

On any page in Lesson One, find five nominalizations and decide whether they should be changed or remain as they are.

SUMMING UP

The System of Clarity

We can represent our principles systematically. As we read, we integrate two levels of structure. One level is its predictable grammatical sequence:

FIXED	Subject	Verb	Complement

The other level of structure is its story, a level of meaning whose elements have no fixed order, but do appear in one that we *expect:*

VARIABLE	Characters	Action	—

We can graphically represent the conjunction of these principles.

FIXED	Subject	Verb	Complement
VARIABLE	Characters	Action	—

Readers expect to see characters first, then their actions. But more specifically, they expect to see characters as subjects of verbs and they expect to see those verbs express important actions involving those

characters. To the degree that we do not fulfill their expectations, to that degree we make them work harder.

All sentences have two levels of structure: A fixed level of grammar and a variable level of story. Think of that fixed level as the *geography* of a sentence and the variable level as containing its elements of meaning, variable elements that you can move through the fixed geography. But while you can move those elements of meaning to different places in a sentence, readers expect to see them in predictable places: They expect to see characters in subjects and actions in verbs. Those expectations give us our first two principles of style:

1. When appropriate, express actions and conditions in verbs:

   The **intention** of the committee is **improvement** of morale.

   The committee **intends** to **improve** morale.

2. When appropriate, make subjects of verbs the agents of actions.

   A decision on the part of **the Dean** in regard to the funding by **the Department** of the 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.

Don't revise nominalizations that do the following:

1. Refer to a previous sentence:

   These arguments all depend on a single unproven claim.

   This decision can lead to costly consequences.

2. Sum up an awkward "The fact that":

   The fact that I strenuously objected impressed the jury.

   My strenuous objections impressed the jury.

3. Name what would be the object of its verbal form:

   I do not know her **intentions.**

   I do not know **what she intends.**

4. Refer to a familiar and often repeated concept:

   Few issues have so divided us as **abortion on demand.**

   The Equal Rights **Amendment** was an issue in past **elections.**

5. Occur after *there is/are* to introduce a topic that you intend to develop in the next few sentences:

   There are three ways to explain our **failures.** First, we . . .

In the next Lesson, we revisit characters and subjects.

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STYLE

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