

Lesson

3

Actions

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *HAMLET*, 3.2

I am unlikely to trust a sentence that comes easily.

—WILLIAM GASS

UNDERSTANDING JUDGMENTS

We have words enough to praise writing we like—*clear, direct, concise*—and more than enough to abuse writing we don't: *unclear, indirect, abstract, dense, complex*. We can use those words to distinguish these two sentences:

- 1a. The cause of our schools' failure at teaching basic skills is not understanding the influence of cultural background on learning.
- 1b. Our schools have failed to teach basic skills because they do not understand how cultural background influences the way a child learns.

Most of us would call (1a) too complex, (1b) clearer and more direct. But those words don't refer to anything *in* those sentences; they describe how those sentences make us *feel*. When we say that (1a) is unclear, we mean that *we* have a hard time understanding it; we say it's dense when *we* struggle to read it.

The problem is to understand what is in those two sentences that makes readers feel as they do. Only then can you rise above

your too-good understanding of your own writing to know when your readers will think it needs revising. To do that, you have to know what counts as a well-told story. (To profit from this lesson and the next three, you must be able to identify verbs, **SIMPLE SUBJECTS**, and **WHOLE SUBJECTS**. See the Glossary.)

TELLING STORIES: CHARACTERS AND ACTIONS

This story has a problem:

- 2a. Once upon a time, as a walk through the woods was taking place on the part of Little Red Riding Hood, the Wolf's jump out from behind a tree occurred, causing her fright.

We prefer something closer to this:

- ✓ 2b. Once upon a time, Little Red Riding Hood was walking through the woods, when the Wolf jumped out from behind a tree and frightened her.

Most readers think (2b) tells the story more clearly than (2a) because it follows two principles:

- The main characters are subjects of verbs.
- Those verbs express specific actions.

Principle of Clarity 1: Make Main Characters Subjects

Look at the subjects in (2a). The simple subjects (underlined) are *not* the main characters (italicized):

- 2a. Once upon a time, as a walk through the woods was taking place on the part of *Little Red Riding Hood*, the *Wolf's* jump out from behind a tree occurred, causing *her* fright.

Those subjects name not characters but actions expressed in abstract nouns, *walk* and *jump*:

SUBJECT	VERB
a walk through the woods	was taking place
the Wolf's jump out from behind a tree	occurred

The whole subject of *occurred* does have a character in it: the possessive noun *Wolf's jump*. But the Wolf is not *the* subject. It is only attached to the simple subject *jump*.

Contrast those abstract subjects with these, where the characters (italicized) are also the simple subjects (underlined):

- ✓ 2b. Once upon a time, *Little Red Riding Hood* was walking through the woods, when the *Wolf* jumped out from behind a tree and frightened her.

The subjects and the main characters are now the same words:

SUBJECT/CHARACTER	VERB
<i>Little Red Riding Hood</i>	was walking
<i>Wolf</i>	jumped

Principle of Clarity 2: Make Important Actions Verbs

Now look at how the actions and verbs differ in (2a): the characters' actions are expressed not in verbs but in abstract nouns (actions are boldfaced; verbs are capitalized):

- 2a. Once upon a time, as a **walk** through the woods **WAS TAKING** place on the part of *Little Red Riding Hood*, the *Wolf's jump* out from behind a tree **OCCURRED**, causing her **fright**.

Note how vague the verbs are: *was taking*, *occurred*. The story isn't about *taking* and *occurring* but about *walking* and *jumping* and *frightening*. In (2b), the clearer sentence, the verbs name these important story actions:

- ✓ 2b. Once upon a time, *Little Red Riding Hood* **WAS WALKING** through the woods, when the *Wolf* **JUMPED** out from behind a tree and **FRIGHTENED** her.

Here's the point: In (2a) the sentence that seems wordy and indirect, the two main characters, *Little Red Riding Hood* and the *Wolf*, are *not* subjects, and their actions—*walking*, *jumping*, and *frightening*—are *not* verbs. In (2b), the more direct sentence, those two main characters *are* subjects and their main actions *are* verbs. That's why we prefer (2b).

FAIRY TALES AND “SERIOUS” WRITING

Writing in college or on the job may seem distant from fairy tales like “Little Red Riding Hood.” But it's not, because in every kind

of writing, most sentences still tell stories. That is, they are still about characters doing things. Compare these two:

- 3a. The Federalists' argument in regard to the destabilization of government by popular democracy was based on their belief in the tendency of factions to further their self-interest at the expense of the common good.

- ✓ 3b. The Federalists argued that popular democracy destabilized government, because they believed that factions tended to further their self-interest at the expense of the common good.

We can analyze those sentences as we did the ones about Little Red Riding Hood.

Sentence (3a) feels dense for two reasons. First, its characters are not subjects. Its simple subject (underlined) is *argument*, but the characters (italicized) are *Federalists*, *popular democracy*, *government*, and *factions*:

- 3a. The *Federalists'* **argument** in regard to the destabilization of *government* by *popular democracy* was based on *their* belief in the tendency of *factions* to further *their* self-interest at the expense of the common good.

Second, the important actions (boldfaced) are not verbs (capitalized) but abstract nouns:

- 3a. The *Federalists'* **argument** in regard to the **destabilization** of government by popular democracy was based on their **belief** in the **tendency** of factions to **FURTHER** their self-interest at the expense of the common good.

Notice how long and complex is the whole subject of (3a) and how little meaning is expressed by its main verb *was based*:

WHOLE SUBJECT

VERB

The Federalists' argument in regard to the destabilization of government by popular democracy was based

Readers think (3b) is clearer for two reasons: most of the characters (italicized) are subjects (underlined), and the actions (boldfaced) are verbs (capitalized):

- ✓ 3b. The *Federalists* **ARGUED** that *popular democracy* **DESTABILIZED** *government*, because *they* **BELIEVED** that *factions* **TENDED TO FURTHER** their self-interest at the expense of the common good.

Note as well that when we make a character the simple subject, the whole subject (*The Federalists*) also becomes short and concrete.

In the rest of this lesson, we look at verbs and actions; in the next, at subjects and characters.

VERBS AND ACTIONS

Our principle is this: a sentence seems clear when its important actions are in verbs. Look at how sentences (4a) and (4b) express their actions. In (4a), most of the actions (boldfaced) are not verbs (capitalized); they are nouns:

4a. Our lack of data **PREVENTED evaluation** of UN actions in **targeting** funds to areas most in **need of assistance**.

In (4b), on the other hand, the actions are almost all verbs:

✓ 4b. Because we **LACKED** data, we could not **EVALUATE** whether the UN **HAD TARGETED** funds to areas that most **NEEDED assistance**.

Readers will think your writing is dense if you use lots of abstract nouns, especially those derived from verbs and ADJECTIVES, nouns ending in *-tion*, *-ment*, *-ence*, and so on, and especially when you make those abstract nouns the subjects of verbs.

A noun derived from a verb or adjective has a technical name: nominalization. The word illustrates its meaning: when we nominalize *nominalize*, we create the nominalization *nominalization*. Here are a few examples:

VERB → NOMINALIZATION	ADJECTIVE → NOMINALIZATION
discover → discovery	careless → carelessness
resist → resistance	different → difference
react → reaction	proficient → proficiency

We can also nominalize a verb by adding *-ing* (making it a gerund):

She flies → her flying We sang → our singing

Some nominalizations and verbs are identical:

hope → hope result → result repair → repair

We **REQUEST** that you **REVIEW** the data.

Our **request** is that you do a **review** of the data.

(Some actions also hide out in adjectives: *It is applicable → it applies*. Some others: *indicative, dubious, argumentative, deserving*.)

No element of style more characterizes writing that feels dense, abstract, indirect, and difficult than lots of nominalizations, especially as the subjects of verbs.

Here's the point: In grade school, we learned that subjects are characters (or "doers") and that verbs are actions. That's often true:

subject	verb	object
We	discussed	the problem.
doer	action	

But it is not true for this almost-synonymous sentence:

subject	verb	topic	of our discussion.
The problem	was	the topic	
		doer	action

We can move characters and actions around in a sentence, and subjects and verbs don't have to name any particular kind of thing at all. But when you match characters to subjects and actions to verbs in most of your sentences, readers are likely to think your prose is clear, direct, and readable.

Exercise 3.1

If you aren't sure whether you can distinguish verbs, adjectives, and nominalizations, practice on the list below. Turn verbs and adjectives into nominalizations, and nominalizations into adjectives and verbs. Remember that some verbs and nominalizations have the same form:

Heavy rains cause flooding.

Heavy rains are a cause of flooding.

analysis	believe	attempt	conclusion	evaluate
suggest	approach	comparison	define	discuss
expression	failure	intelligent	thorough	appearance
decrease	improve	increase	accuracy	careful
emphasize	explanation	description	clear	examine

Exercise 3.2

Identify the subject, character, verb, and action in these pairs of sentences. The unclear sentence is first; the improved sentence follows. What do you notice about how characters and subjects, and actions and verbs, are aligned in each?

- 1a. There is opposition among many voters to nuclear power plants based on a belief in their threat to human health.
- 1b. Many voters oppose nuclear power plants because they believe that such plants threaten human health.
- 2a. Growth in the market for electronic books is driven by the frequent preference among customers for their convenience and portability.
- 2b. The market for electronic books has grown because customers frequently prefer their convenience and portability.
- 3a. There is a belief among some researchers that consumers' choices in fast food restaurants are healthier because there are postings of nutrition information in menus.
- 3b. Some researchers believe that consumers are choosing healthier foods because fast food restaurants are posting nutrition information in their menus.
- 4a. The design of the new roller coaster was more of a struggle for the engineers than had been their expectation.
- 4b. The engineers struggled more than they expected when designing the new roller coaster.
- 5a. Because the student's preparation for the exam was thorough, none of the questions on it were a surprise.
- 5b. Because the student prepared thoroughly for the exam, she was not surprised by any of the questions on it.

Exercise 3.3

Create three sentences using verbs and adjectives from Exercise 3.1. Then rewrite them using the corresponding nominalizations (keep the meaning the same). For example, using *suggest*, *discuss*, and *careful*, write:

I suggest that we discuss the issue carefully.

Then rewrite that sentence into its nominalized form:

My suggestion is that our discussion of the issue be done with care.

Only when you see how a clear sentence can be made unclear will you understand why it seemed clear in the first place.

THE PROBLEM OF FAMILIARITY

Writers tend to write badly when they are unsure about what they want to say or how to say it. But they also tend to write badly because they are too familiar with their own writing to accurately judge how readers will respond to it.

You've probably had this experience: you think you've written something good, but your reader thinks otherwise. You wonder whether that person is just being difficult, but you bite your tongue and try to fix it, even though you think it should already be clear to anyone who can read Dr. Seuss. When that happens to me (regularly, I might add), I almost always realize—eventually—that my readers are right, that they see where my writing needs work better than I do.

Why are we so often right about the writing of others and so often wrong about our own? It is because we all read into our own writing what we want readers to get out of it. That explains why two readers can disagree about the clarity of the same piece of writing: the reader who is most familiar with its content will likely find it clearest. Both are right, because clarity is not a property of sentences but an impression of readers. It is in the eye of the beholder.

That is why we need to look at our own writing in a way that is almost mechanical, that sidesteps our too-good understanding of it. The quickest way is to follow the procedure below.

HOW TO REVISE: CHARACTERS AND ACTIONS

You can use the two principles of clarity (make main characters subjects; make important actions verbs) to explain why your readers judge your prose as they do. But more important, you can also use them to identify and revise sentences that seem clear to you but will not to your readers. Revision is a three-step process: analyze, assess, rewrite.

1. Analyze

- a. Ignoring short (four- or five-word) introductory phrases, underline the first seven or eight words in each sentence.

The automation of manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes by corporations means the loss of jobs for many blue-collar workers.

- b. Then ask two questions:

- Did you underline any abstract nouns as simple subjects?

The **automation** of manufacturing, **assembly**, and **shipping** processes by corporations means the loss of jobs for many blue-collar workers.

- Did you underline seven or eight words before getting to a verb?

The **automation** of manufacturing, **assembly**, and **shipping** processes by corporations (10 words) **means** the loss of jobs for many blue-collar workers.

If you answer yes to either, you should probably revise.

2. Assess

- Decide who or what your main characters are (more about this in the next lesson).

The automation of manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes by **corporations** means the loss of jobs for many **blue-collar workers**.

- Then look for the actions that those characters perform, especially actions hidden in nominalizations, those abstract nouns derived from verbs.

The **automation** of manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes by corporations means the **loss** of jobs for many **blue-collar workers**.

3. Rewrite

- If the actions are nominalizations, make them verbs.

automation → automate loss → lose

- Make the characters the subjects of those verbs.

corporations automate blue-collar workers lose

- Rewrite the sentence with characters as subjects and actions as verbs, using subordinating conjunctions such as *because*, *if*, *when*, *although*, *why*, *how*, *whether*, or *that* to show relationships among ideas.

✓ Many blue-collar workers are losing their jobs **because** corporations are automating their manufacturing, assembly and shipping processes.

SOME COMMON PATTERNS

You can quickly spot and revise five common patterns of nominalizations.

1. The nominalization is the subject of an empty verb such as *be*, *seems*, *has*, etc.:

The **intention** of the committee is to audit the records.

- Change the nominalization to a verb:

intention → intend

- Find a character that would be the subject of that verb:

The intention of the **committee** is to audit the records.

- Make that character the subject of the new verb:

✓ The **committee** **INTENDS** to audit the records.

2. The nominalization follows an empty verb:

The **agency** **CONDUCTED** an **investigation** into the matter.

- Change the nominalization to a verb:

investigation → investigate

- Replace the empty verb with the new verb:

conducted → investigated

✓ The **agency** **INVESTIGATED** the matter.

3. One nominalization is the subject of an empty verb and a second nominalization follows it:

Our **loss** in sales was a result of their **expansion** of outlets.

- Revise the nominalizations into verbs:

loss → lose expansion → expand

- Identify the characters that would be the subjects of those verbs:

Our **loss** in sales was a result of **their** **expansion** of outlets.

- Make those characters subjects of those verbs:

we lose they expand

- Link the new clauses with a logical connection:

• To express simple cause: *because*, *since*, *when*

• To express conditional cause: *if*, *provided that*, *so long as*

• To contradict expected causes: *though*, *although*, *unless*

Our loss in sales	→	We lost sales
was the result of	→	because
their expansion of outlets	→	they EXPANDED outlets

4. A nominalization follows *there is* or *there are*:

There is no **need** for our further **study** of this problem.

a. Change the nominalization to a verb:

need → need study → study

b. Identify the character that should be the subject of the verb:

There is no **need** for *our* further **study** of this problem.

c. Make that character the subject of the verb:

no need → we need not our study → we study

✓ We need not study this problem further.

5. Two or three nominalizations in a row are joined by prepositions:

We did a **review** of the **evolution** of the brain.

a. Turn the first nominalization into a verb:

review → review

b. Either leave the second nominalization as it is, or turn it into a verb in a clause beginning with *how* or *why*:

evolution of the brain → how the brain evolved

✓ First, we REVIEWED the **evolution** of the brain.

✓ First, we REVIEWED how the brain EVOLVED.

QUICK TIP When you revise a complicated sentence,

you will have more than one character-action clause. Decide how the clauses fit together, then try out these patterns: *X because Y*; *Since X, Y*; *If X, then Y*; *Although X, Y*; *X and but so Y*.

SOME HAPPY CONSEQUENCES

When you consistently rely on verbs to express important actions, your readers benefit in many ways:

1. Your sentences are more concrete. Compare:

There was an affirmative **decision** for **expansion**.

✓ *The director DECIDED to EXPAND the program.*

2. Your sentences are more concise. When you use nominalizations, you have to add articles like *a* and *the* and prepositions such as *of*, *by*, and *in*. You don't need them when you use verbs and conjunctions:

A **revision** of the program will **result** in **increases** in our **efficiency** in the **servicing** of clients.

✓ *If we REVISE the program, we CAN SERVE clients more EFFICIENTLY.*

3. The logic of your sentences is clearer. When you nominalize verbs, you link actions with fuzzy prepositions and phrases such as *of*, *by*, and *on the part of*. But when you use verbs, you link clauses with precise subordinating conjunctions such as *because*, *although*, and *if*:

Our more effective presentation of our study resulted in our success, despite an earlier start by others.

✓ *Although others started earlier, we succeeded **because** we presented our study more effectively.*

4. Your sentences tell more coherent stories. Nominalizations let you distort the sequence of actions. (The numbers refer to the ideal sequence of events.)

Decisions⁴ in regard to administration⁵ of medication despite inability² of irrational patients appearing¹ in a Trauma Center to provide legal consent³ rest with the attending physician alone.

✓ *When patients appear¹ in a Trauma Center and behave² so irrationally that they cannot legally consent³ to treatment, only the attending physician can decide⁴ whether to medicate⁵ them.*

Exercise 3.4

Write a sentence in each of these pairs is clear, expressing characters as subjects and actions as verbs; the other is less clear, with actions in

nominalizations and characters often not in subjects. First, decide which is which. Then underline subjects, bracket verbs, box actions, and circle characters. What do you notice about where these words appear in the sentences?

- 1a. Some people argue that atmospheric carbon dioxide does not elevate global temperature.
- 1b. There has been speculation by educators about the role of the family in improving educational achievement.
- 2a. The store's price increases led to frustration among its customers.
- 2b. When we write concisely, readers understand easily.
- 3a. Researchers have identified the AIDS virus but have failed to develop a vaccine to immunize those at risk.
- 3b. Attempts by economists at defining full employment have been met with failure.
- 4a. Complaints by editorial writers about voter apathy rarely offer suggestions about dispelling it.
- 4b. Although critics claim that children who watch a lot of television tend to become less able readers, no one has demonstrated that to be true.
- 5a. The loss of market share to Japan by domestic automakers resulted in the disappearance of hundreds of thousands of jobs.
- 5b. When educators embrace new-media technology, our schools will teach complex subjects more effectively.
- 6a. We need to know which parts of our national forests are being logged most extensively so that we can save virgin stands at greatest risk.
- 6b. There is a need for an analysis of library use to provide a reliable base for the projection of needed resources.

Exercise 3.5

Now revise the nominalized sentences in Exercise 3.4 into sentences in which the actions are verbs. Use its paired verbal version as a model. For example, if the verbal sentence begins with *when*, begin your revision with *when*:

Sentence to revise: 2a. The store's price increases led to frustration among its customers.

Model:

2b. When we write concisely, readers understand more easily.

Your revision:

2a. When the store increased prices, . . .

Exercise 3.6

Revise these next sentences so that the nominalizations are verbs and characters are their subjects. In (1) through (4), characters are italicized and nominalizations are boldfaced.

1. *Lincoln's hope* was for the **preservation** of the Union without war, but the *South's attack* on Fort Sumter made war an **inevitability**.
 2. Attempts were made on the part of the *president's aides* to assert **his immunity** from a *congressional subpoena*.
 3. There were **predictions** by *business executives* that the economy would experience a quick revival.
 4. Your **analysis** of my report omits any data in **support** of your **criticism** of my findings.
- In sentences 5 through 8, the characters are italicized; find the actions and revise.
5. Attempts at explaining increases in voter participation in this year's elections were made by *several candidates*.
 6. The agreement by the *class* on the reading list was based on the assumption that there would be tests on only certain selections.
 7. There was no independent *business-sector* study of the cause of the sudden increase in the trade surplus.
 8. An understanding as to the need for controls over drinking on campus was recognized by *fraternities*.

QUALIFICATION: USEFUL NOMINALIZATIONS

We so relentlessly urged you to turn nominalizations into verbs that you might think you should never use them. But in fact, you can write well without them. The trick is to know which to keep and which to revise. Keep these:

A **nominalization that is a short subject that refers to a previous sentence**:

✓ These arguments all depend on a single unproven claim.

✓ **This decision** can lead to positive outcomes.

Those nominalizations link one sentence to another in a cohesive flow, an issue I'll discuss in more detail in Lesson 5.

2. A short nominalization that replaces an awkward *The fact that*:

The fact that she **ADMITTED** guilt impressed me.

✓ Her **admission** of guilt impressed me.

But then, why not this?

✓ She **IMPRESSED** me when she **ADMITTED** her guilt.

3. A nominalization that names what would be the object of the verb:

I accepted what she **REQUESTED** [that is, *She requested something*].

✓ I accepted her **request**.

Familiar nominalizations such as *request* feel more concrete than abstract ones. But when you can, you should still express actions as verbs:

Her **request** for assistance **CAME** after the deadline.

✓ She **REQUESTED** assistance after the deadline.

4. A nominalization that refers to a concept so familiar to your readers that to them, it is a virtual character (more about this in the next lesson):

✓ Few problems have so divided us as **abortion on demand**.

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

✓ **Taxation** without **representation** did not spark the American **Revolution**.

Those nominalizations name familiar concepts: *abortion on demand*, *amendment*, *election*, *taxation*, *representation*, *revolution*. You must develop an eye for distinguishing nominalizations expressing common ideas from those you can revise into verbs.

There is a **demand** for a **repeal** of the **inheritance** tax.

✓ We **DEMAND** that Congress **REPEAL** the **inheritance** tax.

CLARITY, NOT SIMPLEMENTEDNESS

Your readers want you to write clearly, even simply—but not simplistically (see p. 21). Some argue that all sentences should be short, no more than fifteen words or so. But many mature ideas cannot

be expressed so compactly. In Lessons 10 and 11 we look at ways to write longer sentences that communicate complex ideas but are still readable.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Exercise 3.7

Go through a page of your own writing. Underline whole subjects and bracket verbs. Now, think about the story you are telling. Circle the main characters and box their actions, wherever they appear. Look especially for actions hidden in nominalizations. What do you notice? How clear will a reader likely find your writing? If necessary, revise to align characters with subjects and specific actions with verbs.

Exercise 3.8

Writers tend to think their writing is clearer than their readers do. Select a page of your writing and share it with a reader. Both of you rate its clarity on a scale of 1–10, with 10 being perfectly clear and 1 being incomprehensible. Use the procedures for analyzing sentences on pages 35–36 to explain any differences in your ratings. Revise your writing if necessary.

WRAPPING UP

Two most general principles for clear sentences are these: like main characters the subjects of your verbs; make those characters' important actions your verbs.

We can represent these principles graphically. Readers must mentally integrate two levels of sentence structure. One, the grammatical level, is the relatively fixed sequence of subject and verb (the empty box is for everything that follows the verb):

Fixed Positions Subject Verb _____ Grammar Level

The other, the story level, is based on characters and their actions and has no fixed order. Characters and actions can appear where in a sentence, because writers can move them around.

But readers prefer them to align with subjects and verbs. We can represent this preference graphically:

Fixed Positions	Subject	Verb	Grammar Level
Movable Elements	Character	Action	Story Level

Keep in mind that readers want to see characters not just *in* a subject, but *as* the subject. Not this:

The president's veto of the bill **INFURIATED** Congress.

The veto of the bill by the president **INFURIATED** Congress.

But this:

✓ When the president **VERIFIED** the bill, he **INFURIATED** Congress.

When you frustrate those expectations, you make readers work harder than necessary. So keep these principles in mind as you revise:

1. Express actions in verbs:

The **intention** of the committee is to improve morale.

✓ The committee **INTENDS** to improve morale.

2. Make the subjects of those verbs the characters associated with those actions:

A decision by the *dean* in regard to the funding of the program by the *department* is necessary for adequate *staff* preparation.

✓ The *staff* **CAN PREPARE** adequately, only after the *dean* **DECIDES** whether the *department* **WILL FUND** the program.

3. Don't revise nominalizations when:

a. they refer to a previous sentence;

✓ **These arguments** all depend on a single unproven claim.

b. they replace an awkward *the fact that*:

The fact that she strenuously objected impressed me.

✓ **Her strenuous objections** impressed me.

ⓐ they name what would be the object of a verb:

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

✓ I do not know **her intentions**.

ⓑ they name a concept so familiar to your readers that it is a virtual character:

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

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