*Lesson*

# 4

# Characters

*Whatever is translatable in other and simpler words of the same language, without loss of sense or dignity, is bad.*
—SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

*When character is lost, all is lost.*
—ANONYMOUS

## UNDERSTANDING CHARACTERS

Readers think sentences are clear and direct when they see key actions in their verbs. Compare (1a) with (1b):

1a. The EPA feared the president would recommend to Congress that it reduce its budget.

1b. The EPA had fears that the president would send a recommendation to Congress that it make a reduction in its budget.

Most readers think (1b) is a bit less clear than (1a), but not much. Now compare (1b) to (1c):

1c. The fear of the EPA was that a recommendation from the president to Congress would be for a reduction in its budget.

Most readers think that (1c) is much less clear than either (1a) or (1b).

The reason is this: In both (1a) and (1b), the important characters (italicized) are subjects (underlined) of verbs (capitalized):





1a. The *EPA* FEARED the *president* WOULD RECOMMEND to *Congress* that it REDUCE its budget.

1b. The *EPA* HAD fears that the *president* WOULD SEND a recommendation to *Congress* that *it* MAKE a reduction in its budget.

But in (1c) the two simple subjects (underlined) are not concrete characters but abstractions (boldfaced):

1c. The **fear** of the *EPA* WAS that a **recommendation** from the *president* to *Congress* WOULD BE for a **reduction** in its budget.

The different verbs in (1a) and (1b) matter somewhat, but the abstract subjects in (1c) matter more. Even worse, characters can be deleted entirely, like this:

1d. There WAS **fear** that there WOULD BE a **recommendation** for a budget **reduction**.

Who fears? Who recommends? The sentence's context may help readers guess correctly, but if the context is ambiguous, you risk them guessing wrongly.

***Here's the point:*** Readers want actions in verbs, but they want characters as subjects even more. We create a problem for readers when for no good reason we fail to name characters in subjects or, worse, delete them entirely. It is important to express actions in verbs, but the *first* principle of a clear style is this: make the subjects of most of your verbs the main characters in your story.

## HOW TO REVISE: CHARACTERS AND ACTIONS (AGAIN)

To get characters into subjects, you have to know three things:

1. when your subjects are not characters
2. if they aren't, where you should look for characters
3. what you should do when you find them (or don't)

### The Basic Procedure

This sentence feels indirect and impersonal:

Governmental intervention in fast-changing technologies has led to the distortion of market evolution and interference in new product development.

We can analyze and revise it according to our procedure from Lesson 3:

1. **Underline the first seven or eight words:**

   Governmental intervention in fast-changing technologies has led to the distortion of market evolution and interference in new product development.

   In those first words, readers want to see characters not just *in* the whole subjects of verbs, as *government* is implied in *governmental*, but *as* their simple subjects. Here they aren't.

2. **Find the main characters.** They may be possessive nouns or pronouns attached to nominalizations, objects of prepositions (particularly *by* and *of*), or only implied. In that sentence, one main character is in the adjective *governmental;* the other, *market*, is in the object of a preposition: *of market evolution.*

3. **Skim the passage for actions involving those characters, particularly actions buried in nominalizations.** Ask *Who is doing what?*

| | |
|---|---|
| *governmental* **intervention** | → ✓ *government* **intervenes** |
| **distortion** | → ✓ *[government]* **distorts** |
| *market* **evolution** | → ✓ *markets* **evolve** |
| **interference** | → ✓ *[government]* **interferes** |
| **development** | → ✓ *[markets]* **develop** |

To revise, reassemble those new subjects and verbs into a sentence, using conjunctions such as *if, although, because, when, how*, and *why:*

✓ When a *government* **INTERVENES** in fast-changing technologies, *it* **DISTORTS** how *markets* **EVOLVE** and **INTERFERES** with their ability to **DEVELOP** new products.

Be aware that just as actions can be in adjectives (*reliable* → *rely*), so can characters:

Medieval *theological* debates often addressed issues considered trivial by modern *philosophical* thought.

When you find a character implied in an adjective, revise in the same way:

✓ *Medieval theologians* often debated issues that *modern philosophers* consider trivial.



***Here's the point:*** The first step in analyzing a dense style is to look at subjects. If you do not see main characters as simple subjects, you have to look for them. They can be in objects of prepositions, in possessive pronouns, or in adjectives. Once you find them, look for actions they are involved in. When you are revising, make those characters the subjects of verbs naming those actions. When you are reading a dense passage, try to find characters and their actions, and retell the story to yourself.

## Reconstructing Absent Characters

Readers have the biggest problem with sentences devoid of *all* characters:

A decision was made in favor of doing a study of the disagreements.

That sentence could mean either of these, and more:

We decided that I should study why they disagreed.

I decided that you should study why he disagreed.

The writer may know who is doing what, and readers may be able to guess from context. But often they can't and will need help.

Sometimes we omit characters to make a general statement:

Research strategies that look for more than one variable are of more use in understanding factors in psychiatric disorder than strategies based on the assumption that the presence of psychopathology is dependent on a single gene or on strategies in which only one biological variable is studied.

But when we try to revise that into something clearer, we have to invent characters and then decide what to call them. Do we use *one*, *we* or *you?* Do we name a generic "doer"?

✓ If *one/we/you/researchers* are to understand what causes psychiatric disorder, *one/we/you/they* should use research strategies that look for more than one variable rather than assume that a single gene is responsible for a psychopathology or adopt a strategy in which *one/we/you/they* study only one biological variable.

To most of us, *one* feels stiff, but *we* may be ambiguous because it can refer just to the writer, or to the writer and others but not the reader, or to the reader and writer but not others, or to everyone.

And if you are not directly addressing your reader, *you* is usually inappropriate.

But if you avoid both nominalizations and vague pronouns, you can slide into passive verbs (I'll discuss them in a moment):

> To understand what makes patients vulnerable to psychiatric disorders, strategies that look for more than one variable **SHOULD BE USED** rather than strategies in which a gene **IS ASSUMED** to cause psychopathology or only one biological variable **IS STUDIED**.

To reconstruct missing characters, you have to use your judgment. In general, choose the most specific characters you can find.

**QUICK TIP** When you are explaining a complicated issue to someone involved in it, imagine sitting across the table from that person, saying *you* as often as you can:

> Taxable intangible property includes financial notes and municipal bonds. A one-time tax of 2% on its value applies to this property.
>
> ✓ **You** have to pay tax on **your** intangible property, including **your** financial notes and municipal bonds. On this property, **you** pay a one-time tax of 2%.

If *you* is not appropriate, change it to a character that is:

> **Taxpayers** have to pay tax on their intangible property, including **their** financial notes and municipal bonds. **They** pay . . .

## Abstractions as Characters

So far, I've discussed characters as if they must be flesh-and-blood people. But inanimate things and even abstractions can serve as characters, so long as you make them the subjects of a series of sentences that tell a story. For instance, we might have solved the problem of the previous example by choosing *studies* as our character:

> ✓ To understand what causes psychiatric disorders, *studies* should look for more than one variable rather than adopt a strategy in which *they* test only one biological variable or assume that a single gene is responsible for a psychopathology.

Now the sentence is clear but also appropriately professional.

You can also tell stories whose main characters are abstractions, even nominalizations, so long as you make them



subjects of a series of sentences and clauses. Here's a story about *freedom of speech*, a familiar abstraction made up of two nominalizations (subjects are underlined; verbs are capitalized):

> No human right is more basic than *freedom of speech*, *which* ENSURES individual expression and GUARANTEES the open flow of ideas in society. *It* AROSE as a pillar of modern political thought during the late eighteenth century, and in 1948, *it* WAS RECOGNIZED by the United Nations as a universal right. *It* protects not only unpopular political views but also other forms of controversial expression, including artistic expression. Nevertheless, *freedom of speech* IS not absolute: *it* IS BOUNDED by other rights and principles, including. . . .

Like *studies* in the last example, *freedom of speech* becomes a character because it (or an associated pronoun like *which* or *it*) appears as the subject of verbs that state specific actions: *ensures, guarantees, arose*, and so on. In this case, two passive verbs, *was recognized* and *is bounded*, keep the phrase in the subject position.

But when you use abstractions as characters, you can create a problem. A story about an abstraction as familiar as *freedom of speech* is clear enough, but if you surround an unfamiliar abstract character with a lot of other abstractions, readers may feel that your writing is unnecessarily dense.

For example, few of us are familiar with the terms *prospective intention* and *immediate intention*, so most of us are likely to struggle with a story about them, especially when they are surrounded by other abstractions (actions are boldfaced; human characters are italicized):

> The **argument** is this. The cognitive component of **intention** exhibits a high degree of **complexity**. **Intention** is temporally divisible into two: prospective **intention** and immediate **intention**. The cognitive function of prospective **intention** is the **representation** of a *subject*'s similar past **actions**, *his* current situation, and *his* course of future **actions**. That is, the cognitive component of prospective **intention** is a **plan**. The cognitive function of immediate **intention** is the **monitoring** and **guidance** of ongoing bodily **movement**.
>
> —Myles Brand, *Intending and Acting: Toward a Naturalized Action Theory*

We can make that passage clearer if we tell its story from the point of view of flesh-and-blood characters (italicized; actions are boldfaced; verbs are capitalized):

> ✓ *I* **ARGUE** this about **intention**. **It** HAS a complex cognitive component of two temporal kinds: prospective and immediate. *We* **USE** prospective **intention** to **REPRESENT** how *we* HAVE **ACTED** in our past and present and how *we* WILL **ACT** in the future. That is, *we*

USE the cognitive component of prospective **intention** to HELP *us* PLAN. *We* USE immediate **intention** to MONITOR and GUIDE *our* bodies as *we* MOVE them.

But have I made this passage say something that the writer didn't mean? Some argue that any change in form changes meaning. In this case, the writer might offer an opinion, but only his readers could decide whether the two passages have different meanings, because at the end of the day, a passage means only what careful and competent readers think it does.

***Here's the point:*** Most readers want the subjects of verbs to name flesh-and-blood characters. But often, you must write about abstractions. When you do, turn them into virtual characters by making them the subjects of verbs that tell a story. If readers are familiar with your abstractions, no problem. But when they are not, avoid using lots of other abstract nominalizations around them. When you revise an abstract passage, you may have a problem if the hidden characters are "people in general." Unfortunately, unlike many other languages, English offers no good way to name a generic "doer." Try a general term for whoever is doing the action, such as *researchers, social critics, one*, and so on. If that won't work, try *we*.

## *Exercise 4.1*

Analyze and revise these sentences so that each has a specific character as the subject of a specific verb. To revise, you may have to invent characters. Use *we, I,* or any other word that seems appropriate. For the first four sentences, I suggest possible characters in brackets.

1. Contradictions among the data require an explanation. [we]
2. Having their research taken seriously by professionals in the field was hard work for the students. [student researchers]
3. In recent years, the appearance of new interpretations about the meaning of the discovery of America has led to a reassessment of Columbus's place in Western history. [historians]



4. Resistance has been growing against building mental health facilities in residential areas because of a belief that the few examples of improper management are typical. [residents]
5. A decision about forcibly administering medication in an emergency room setting despite the inability of an irrational patient to provide legal consent is usually an on-scene medical decision.
6. The performance of the play was marked by enthusiasm, but there was a lack of intelligent staging.
7. Despite the critical panning of the show's latest season the love of the loyal fans was not affected.
8. The rejection of the proposal was a disappointment but not a surprise because our expectation was that a political decision had been made.

## Characters and Passive Verbs

More than any other advice, you probably remember *Write in the active voice, not the passive.* That's not bad advice, but it has exceptions.

When you write in the active voice, you typically put

- the AGENT or source of an action in the subject
- the GOAL or receiver of an action in a DIRECT OBJECT:

| | subject | verb | object |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Active:** | I | lost | the money |
| | character/agent | action | goal |

A verb is in the passive voice when its PAST PARTICIPLE is preceded by a form of *be* (as it is in this next example). The passive differs from the active in two ways:

- The subject names the goal of the action.
- The agent or source of the action is after the verb in a *by*-phrase or dropped entirely:

| | subject | be + verb | prepositional phrase |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Passive:** | The money | was lost | [by me]. |
| | goal | action | character/agent |

The terms *active* and *passive* are ambiguous, however, because they can refer both to those two *grammatical constructions* and to how a sentence *makes you feel.* We call a sentence *passive* if it feels flat, even if its verb is not in the passive voice. Compare these two sentences:

We can manage the problem if we control costs.

Problem management requires cost control.

Grammatically, both sentences are in the active voice, but the second *feels* passive for three reasons:

- Neither of its actions—*management* and *control*—are verbs; both are nominalizations.
- The subject is *problem management*, an abstraction.
- The sentence lacks flesh-and-blood characters.

To understand why we respond to those two sentences as we do, we have to keep these meanings distinct. In what follows, I discuss grammatical passives.

## Choosing Between Active and Passive

Some critics of style tell us to avoid the passive everywhere because it adds words and often deletes the character or agent, the "doer" of the action. But the passive is sometimes the better choice. To choose between active and passive, you have to answer three questions:

1. **Must your readers know who is responsible for the action?** Often, we don't say who does an action because we don't know or readers won't care. We naturally choose the passive in these sentences:

   ✓ The president **WAS RUMORED** to have considered resigning.

   ✓ Those who **ARE FOUND** guilty can **BE FINED.**

   ✓ Valuable records should always **BE KEPT** in a safe.

   If we do not know who spreads rumors, we cannot say. And no one doubts who finds people guilty or fines them or who should keep records safe, so we don't have to say. So those passives are the right choice.

   Sometimes, of course, writers use the passive when they don't want readers to know who is responsible for an action, especially when the doer is the writer:

   Because the test **WAS** not **COMPLETED**, the flaw **WAS UNCORRECTED.**

   I will discuss the issue of intended impersonality in Lesson 12.



2. **Would the active or passive verb help your readers move more smoothly from one sentence to the next?** We depend on the beginning of a sentence to give us a context of what we know before we read what's new. A sentence confuses us when it opens with information that is new and unexpected. In this next passage, the subject of the second sentence gives us new and complex information (boldfaced) before we read more familiar information that we recall from the previous sentence (italicized):

   We must decide whether to improve education in the sciences alone or to raise the level of education across the whole curriculum. **The weight given to industrial competitiveness as opposed to the value we attach to the liberal arts** (new information) WILL DETERMINE (active verb) *our decision.* (familiar information)

   In the second sentence, the verb *determine* is in the active voice. But we could read the sentence more easily if it were passive, because the passive would put the short, familiar information (*our decision)* first and the newer, more complex information last, the order we prefer:

   ✓ We must decide whether to improve education in the sciences alone or raise the level of education across the whole curriculum. *Our decision* (familiar information) WILL BE DETERMINED (passive verb) **by the weight we give to industrial competiveness as opposed to the value we attach to the liberal arts.** (new information)

   I discuss where to put old and new information more extensively in Lesson 5.

3. **Would the active or passive give readers a more consistent and appropriate point of view?** The writer of this next passage reports the end of World War II in Europe from the point of view of the Allies. To do so, she uses active verbs to make the Allies a consistent sequence of subjects:

   ✓ By early 1945, *the Allies* HAD essentially DEFEATED (active) Germany; all that remained was a bloody climax. *American, French, British,* and *Russian forces* HAD BREACHED (active) its borders and WERE BOMBING (active) it around the clock. But *they* HAD not yet so DEVASTATED (active) Germany as to destroy its ability to resist.

   Had she wanted to explain history from the German point of view, she would have used passive verbs to make Germany the subject/character:

   ✓ By early 1945, *Germany* HAD essentially BEEN DEFEATED; (passive) all that remained was a bloody climax. *Its borders* HAD BEEN BREACHED, (passive) and *it* WAS BEING BOMBED (passive) around the clock. *It* HAD not BEEN SO DEVASTATED, (passive) however, that *it* could not RESIST. (active)

***Here's the point:*** Many writers use the passive too often, but you will struggle to write clearly if you avoid it entirely. Use it in these contexts:

- You don't know who did an action, readers don't care, or you don't want them to know.
- You want to shift a long, unfamiliar, or complex bundle of information to the end of a sentence, especially when doing so lets you begin with a bundle that is shorter, more familiar, or simpler.
- You want to focus your readers' attention on a particular character.

## *Exercise 4.2*

In the following, change all active verbs into passives, and all passives into actives. Which sentences improve? Which do not? (In the first two, active verbs that could be passive are italicized; verbs already passive are boldfaced.)

1. Independence is **gained** by young people when skills are **learned** that the marketplace *values.*
2. Different planes of the painting are **noticed,** because their colors are **set** against a background of shades of gray that are **laid** on in layers that cannot be **seen** unless the surface is **examined** closely.
3. In this article, it is argued that the Vietnam War was fought to extend influence in Southeast Asia and was not ended until it was made clear that the United States could not defeat North Vietnam unless atomic weapons were used.
4. Science education will not be improved in this nation to a level sufficient to ensure that American industry will be supplied with skilled workers and researchers until more money is provided to primary and secondary schools.

## The "Objective" Passive vs. *I/We*

Some scholarly writers use the passive voice to avoid first-person subjects (*I* and *we*) and create an objective point of view:

> Based on the writers' verbal intelligence, prior knowledge, and essay scores, their essays WERE ANALYZED for structure and WERE EVALUATED for richness of concepts. The subjects WERE then DIVIDED into a high- or low-ability group. Half of each group WAS randomly ASSIGNED to a treatment group or to a placebo group.



The writer could have written this:

> Based on the writers' verbal intelligence, prior knowledge, and essay scores, *I* ANALYZED their essays for structure and EVALUATED them for richness of concepts. *I* then SEPARATED the subjects into high- and low-ability groups. *I* randomly ASSIGNED half of each group to a treatment group or to a placebo group.

Is that less objective? Opinions differ, but I don't think so. Nevertheless, the practice of using the passive voice to eliminate first-person subjects is common, especially in the natural and social sciences.

I would note, however, that this impersonal, "scientific" style is a modern development. In his "New Theory of Light and Colors" (1672), Sir Isaac Newton wrote this charming first-person account of an experiment:

> I procured a triangular glass prism, to try therewith the *celebrated phenomena* of colours. And in order thereto, having darkened my chamber, and made a small hole in my window-shuts, to let in a convenient quantity of the sun's light, I placed my prism at its entrance, that it might be thereby refracted to the opposite wall. It was at first a very pleasing divertisement to view the vivid and intense colours produced thereby...

Were Newton writing for a scientific journal today, he might have started, "A triangular glass prism was procured. . . ."

But even today, scholars, including scientists, don't use this dense, impersonal style all the time. In fact, they use the active voice and *I* and *we* regularly. These next passages come from articles in respected journals:

> ✓ This paper is concerned with two problems. Briefly: how can **we** best handle in a transformational grammar, (i) Restrictions on . . ., To illustrate, **we** may cite . . ., **we** shall show . . .
>
> —P.H. Matthews, "Problems of Selection in Transformational Grammar," *Journal of Linguistics*

> ✓ The survey assessed approximately fifty political–cultural variables, too many to examine in a single paper. As a first step, **we** have selected for discussion certain items which involve the cultural requisites for democracy. . . .
>
> —Andrew J. Nathan and Tianjian Shi, "Cultural Requisites for Democracy in China: Findings from a Survey," *Daedalus*

Here are the first few words of several consecutive sentences from an article in *Science*, a journal of great prestige:

> ✓ **We** examine . . ., **We** compare . . ., **We** have used . . ., Each has been weighted . . ., **We** merely take . . ., They are subject . . ., **We** use . . ., Efron and Morris describe . . ., **We** observed . . ., **We** might find . . .
>
> —John P. Gilbert, Bucknam McPeek, and Frederick Mosteller, "Statistics and Ethics in Surgery and Anesthesia," *Science*

It is not true that academic writers always avoid the first person. But they do tend to use it in certain places and in certain ways. Most commonly, the first person appears in what is called METADISCOURSE.

## Metadiscourse

Look again at the passages above. The first, with its passive verbs, describes research procedures that anyone could do. The other passages, those that use active verbs and the first person, describe the writers' own writing and thinking. These passages are examples of *metadiscourse*, or language that refers not to a writer's subject matter but to the writer, the reader, or the writing itself (the Greek prefix "meta-" means "after" or, in this context, "about").

Metadiscourse can appear anywhere, but it is most common in introductions and conclusions, where writers explain what they are going to do or what they have done. While you should not use metadiscourse excessively (see Lesson 9), most writing contains some, and it can help your readers follow and understand you better. Here are some ways you can use metadiscourse:

- To explain your thinking or writing: *In this paper, we will argue/claim/show. . . .; I conclude from these data that. . . .*
- To trace logic or form of your argument: *First . . .; In addition . . .; Most important . . . ; Consequently. . . .*
- To address your readers: *As you recall . . .; Consider. . . .*
- To describe the organization of your document: *This paper is divided into three parts . . .; Our argument proceeds as follows. . .*
- To refer to other parts of your document: *In the passage above . . .; As demonstrated by Figure 1. . . .*
- To express a stance or point of view: *Not unexpectedly . . .; We concur that . . .; It seems unlikely that. . . .*
- To hedge or intensify your argument: *usually, perhaps, seems, in some respects . . .; very, clearly, certainly . . . .* (I discuss hedges and intensifiers more in Lesson 9.)



***Here's the point:*** Some writers and editors avoid the first person by using the passive everywhere, but deleting an *I* or *we* doesn't make a researcher's thinking more objective. We know that behind those impersonal sentences are still flesh-and-blood people doing, thinking, and writing. In fact, the first person *I* and *we* are common in scholarly prose when used with verbs that name actions unique to the writer.

### *Exercise 4.3*

The verbs in 1 through 4 below are passive, but two could be active because they are metadiscourse verbs that would take first-person subjects. Revise the passive verbs that would be changed into active verbs. Then go through each sentence again and revise nominalizations into verbs as needed.

1. It is believed that a lack of understanding about the risks of alcohol is a cause of student bingeing.
2. The model has been subjected to extensive statistical analysis.
3. Success in exporting more crude oil for hard currency is suggested here as the cause of the improvement of the Russian economy.
4. The creation of a database is being considered, but no estimate has been made in regard to the potential of its usefulness.

The verbs in 5 through 8 are active, but some of them should be passive because they are not metadiscourse verbs. Revise the active verbs that should be changed into passive verbs, and revise in other ways as needed.

5. In Section IV, I argue that the indigenous peoples engaged in overcultivation of the land, leading to its exhaustion as a food-producing area.
6. Our intention in this book is to help readers achieve an understanding not only of the differences in grammar between Arabic and English but also the differences in worldview as reflected by Arabic vocabulary.
7. To make an evaluation of changes in the flow rate, I made a comparison of the current rate with the original rate on the basis of figures I had compiled with figures that Jordan had collected.
8. We performed the tissue rejection study on the basis of methods developed with our discovery of increases in dermal sloughing as a result of cellular regeneration.

## Noun + Noun + Noun

One more stylistic choice does not directly involve characters and actions, but I discuss it here because it can distort the match that readers expect between the form of an idea and the grammar of its expression. It is the long COMPOUND NOUN phrase:

> Early *childhood thought disorder misdiagnosis* often results from unfamiliarity with recent *research literature* describing such conditions. This paper is a review of seven recent studies in which are findings of particular relevance to *pre-adolescent hyperactivity diagnosis* and to *treatment modalities* involving *medication maintenance level evaluation procedures.*

It is fine to modify one noun with another, as common phrases such as *stone wall, student center, space shuttle,* and many others show.

But strings of nouns feel lumpy, so avoid them, especially ones you invent. Revise compound nouns of your own invention, especially when they include nominalizations. Just reverse the order of words and find prepositions to connect them:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| early | childhood | thought | disorder | misdiagnosis |
| misdiagnose | disordered | thought | in early | childhood |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 2 |

Reassembled, it looks like this:

> Physicians misdiagnose[5] disordered[4] thought[3] in young[1] children[2] because they are unfamiliar with recent literature on the subject.

If, however, a long compound noun includes a technical term in your field, keep that part of the compound and unpack the rest:

> Physicians misdiagnose[5] **thought disorders**[3,4] in young[1] children[2] because they are unfamiliar with recent literature on the subject.

### *Exercise 4.4*

Identify and revise the strings of nouns in these sentences:

1. Diabetic patient blood pressure reduction may be brought about by renal depressor application.
2. The goal of this article is to describe text comprehension processes and recall protocol production.
3. On the basis of these principles, we may now attempt to formulate narrative information extraction rules.
4. This paper is an investigation into information processing behavior involved in computer human cognition simulation.
5. Enforcement of guidelines for new automobile tire durability must be a Federal Trade Commission responsibility.
6. The Social Security program is a monthly income floor guarantee based on a lifelong contribution schedule.



## Clarity and the Professional Voice

Every group expects its members to show that they accept its values by adopting its distinctive voice. The apprentice banker must learn not only to think and look like a banker but also to speak and write like one. Too often, though, aspiring professionals try to join the club by writing in its most complex technical language. When they do, they adopt an exclusionary style that erodes the trust a civil society depends on, especially in a world where information and expertise are the means to power and control.

It is true that some research can never be made clear to intelligent lay readers—but less often than many researchers think. Here is an excerpt from Talcott Parsons, a social scientist who was as revered for his influence on his field as he was ridiculed for the opacity of his prose.

> Apart from theoretical conceptualization there would appear to be no method of selecting among the indefinite number of varying kinds of factual observation which can be made about a concrete phenomenon or field so that the various descriptive statements about it articulate into a coherent whole, which constitutes an "adequate," a "determinate" description. Adequacy in description is secured insofar as determinate and verifiable answers can be given to all the scientifically important questions involved. What questions are important is largely determined by the logical structure of the generalized conceptual scheme which, implicitly or explicitly, is employed.

We can make that clearer to moderately well-educated readers:

> Without a theory, scientists have no way to select from everything they could say about a subject only that which they can fit into a coherent whole that would be an "adequate" or "determinate" description. Scientists describe something "adequately" only when they can verify answers to all the questions they think are important. They decide what questions are important based on their implicit or explicit theories.

And we could make it even more concise:

> Whatever you describe, you need a theory to fit its parts into a whole. You need a theory not only to verify answers but even to decide what questions to ask.

My versions lose the nuances of Parsons's passage, and the last one loses some of its content. But his excruciatingly dense style numbs all but his most masochistically dedicated readers. Most readers would accept the tradeoff.

Einstein said that everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler. Accordingly, your writing should be as complex as necessary, *but no more*.

## In Your Own Words

### *Exercise 4.5*

Go through a page of your own writing. Circle all of the nominalizations and label all of the verbs as active or passive. For each nominalization and for each passive verb, state the specific reason you used it. If you cannot give a reason, revise it.

### *Exercise 4.6*

Select a passage from a major work in your field. With a partner, analyze its professional voice. What sorts of characters does it use? What is the balance between active and passive verbs? How are nominalizations used? How, and how extensively, does it use metadiscourse? Try to distinguish traits specific to this work from those that characterize the *field's* professional voice. Now, revise a passage of your own writing so that it imitates that voice. What did you have to change?

## Summing Up

1. Readers judge prose to be clear when subjects of sentences name characters and verbs name actions.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fixed Positions | Subject | Verb | _____ | Grammar Level |
| Movable Elements | Character | Action | _____ | Story Level |



2. If you tell a story in which you make abstract nominalizations its main characters and subjects, use as few other nominalizations as you can:

   ***A nominalization*** is a **replacement** of a verb by a noun, often resulting in **displacement** of characters from subjects by nouns.

   ✓ When ***a nominalization*** REPLACES a verb with a noun, *it* often DISPLACES characters from subjects.

3. Use a passive if the agent of an action is self-evident:

   *The voters* REELECTED the president with 54% of the vote.

   ✓ *The president* WAS REELECTED with 54% of the vote.

4. Use a passive if it lets you replace a long subject with a short one:

   Research demonstrating the soundness of our reasoning and the need for action SUPPORTED *this decision.*

   ✓ *This decision* WAS SUPPORTED BY research demonstrating the soundness of our reasoning and the need for action.

5. Use a passive if it gives your readers a coherent sequence of subjects:

   ✓ By early 1945, *the Axis nations* had BEEN essentially DEFEATED; all that remained was a bloody climax. *The German borders* had BEEN BREACHED, and both *Germany and Japan* were being bombed around the clock. *Neither country,* though, had BEEN so DEVASTATED that *it* could not RESIST.

6. Use an active verb if it is a metadiscourse verb:

   The terms of the analysis must BE DEFINED.

   ✓ We must DEFINE the terms of the analysis.

7. When possible, rewrite long compound noun phrases:

   We discussed the **board[1] candidate[2] review[3] meeting[4] schedule[5]**.

   ✓ We discussed the **schedule[5]** of **meetings[4]** to **review[3] candidates[2]** for the **board[1]**.