

# Clarity

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

William Shakespeare

*Action is eloquence.*

William Shakespeare

*Words and deeds are quite different modes of the divine energy.  
Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

*I am not built for academic writings. Action is my domain.*

Gandhi

## Finding a Useful Language: Some First Steps

How might we describe the difference between these two sentences?

- 1a. Because we knew nothing about local conditions, we could not determine how effectively the committee had allocated funds to areas that most needed assistance.
- 1b. Our lack of knowledge about local conditions precluded determination of committee action effectiveness in fund allocation to those areas in greatest need of assistance.

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

To account for style in a way that lets us go beyond saying how we feel, we need a way to explain how we get those impressions. Some would have us count syllables and words—the fewer the better, according to most such schemes. But if we counted every syllable and word we wrote, we would spend more time counting than writing. More to the point, numbers don't explain what makes a sentence awkward or turgid, much less tell anyone how to turn it into a clear and graceful one. And even if counting did tell us when a passage was hard to read, we shouldn't have to count if we knew that it was hard to read just by reading it.

The words we use to communicate our impressions cannot alone constitute a vocabulary sufficient to describe style, but they

are part of one, and so before we move on to a new way of thinking and talking about style, we should reflect on how we use those words. Here are three more sentences that we could say are in some sense “unclear,” which is to say, sentences that make us feel we have to work harder than we think we ought to (or want to). But do they seem “unclear” in the same way?

2. Decisions in regard to the administration of medication despite the inability of irrational patients voluntarily appearing in Trauma Centers to provide legal consent rest with a physician alone.
3. China, so that it could expand and widen its influence and importance among the Eastern European nations, in 1955 began in a quietly orchestrated way a diplomatic offensive directed against the Soviet Union.
4. When pAD4038 in the *E. coli* *pmlimanA* mutant CD1 heterologously overexpressed the *P. aeruginosa* *pmi* gene, there appeared high levels of PMI and GMP activities that were detectable only when pAD4038 was present.

Sentence (2) makes us work too hard because we have to sort out and then mentally re-assemble several actions expressed mostly as abstract nouns—*decisions, administration, medication, inability, consent*—actions that are also arranged in a way that both distorts their underlying sequence and obscures who performs them. When we revise the abstract nouns into verbs expressing actions, when we make their actors the subjects of those verbs and rearrange the events into a chronological sequence, we create a sentence that we could call “clear” because as we read it, it does not confuse us:

- 2a. When a patient voluntarily appears at a Trauma Center but behaves so irrationally that he cannot legally consent to treatment, only a physician can decide whether to administer medication.\*

\*Many readers would revise the original passages more radically than I have. And they would be right to do so. But if I completely rewrote these sentences, I would show only that I was able to rethink the whole idea of the sentence, usually a good thing but not something that can be easily taught. Principled revision would remain a mystery. So for pedagogical reasons, I stay close to the content of each original sentence to demonstrate that we can improve murky sentences without relying on a talent that comes only through experience.

Sentence (3) seems less than entirely clear and direct not because the writer used too many abstract nouns, displaced its actors, and confused the sequence of events, but because he separated parts of the sentence that he should have kept together and because he used more words than he needed. Here’s (3) revised:

- 3a. In 1955, China began to orchestrate a quiet diplomatic offensive against the Soviet Union to expand its influence in Eastern Europe.

Sentence (4) seems unclear not because the writer fell into abstractions or split elements of the sentence, but because she used words that most of us do not understand. If that sentence baffles us, it is clear to someone who knows the field.

The single impressionistic word “unclear” can mask a variety of problems. To correct those problems, we need not avoid impressionistic language; but we do have to use it precisely, and then move beyond it. If we sharpen our impressionistic language a bit, we might say that sentence (2) feels unclear because it is “abstract” or “turgid”; (3) is unclear because it is “disjointed,” or does not “flow.” If sentence (4) seems incomprehensible, it is because we don’t understand the technical language; it is “too technical.”

It is at this point that we need that second vocabulary, one that will help us explain what it is that makes us want to call a passage turgid or disjointed, a vocabulary that also suggests how we can revise it. In this chapter, we’re going to discuss the particular kind of unclarity that we feel in (1b) and (2), the kind of sentences that feel gummy, lumpy, abstract; the kind of sentences that—depending on their subject matter—we variously characterize as academese, legalese, medicalese, bureaucratese. In the following chapters, we’ll discuss different kinds of unclear writing.

### Telling Stories

Stories are among the first kinds of continuous discourse we learn. From the time we are children, we all tell stories to achieve a multitude of ends—to amuse, to warn, to excite, to inform, to explain, to persuade. Storytelling is fundamental to human behavior. No other form of prose can communicate large amounts

of information so quickly and persuasively. At first glance, most academic and professional writing seems to consist not of narrative but of explanation. But even prose that may seem wholly discursive and abstract usually has behind it the two central components of a story—characters and their actions. There are no characters visible in (5a), but that doesn’t mean there aren’t any; compare (5b):

- 5a. The current estimate is of a 50% reduction in the introduction of new chemical products in the event that compliance with the Preliminary Manufacturing Notice becomes a requirement under proposed Federal legislation.
- 5b. If Congress requires that the chemical industry comply with the Preliminary Manufacturing Notice, we estimate that the industry will introduce 50% fewer new products.

It may even be a story whose main characters are concepts:

Because the intellectual foundations of evolution are the same as so many other scientific theories, the falsification of their foundations would be necessary for the replacement of evolutionary theory with creationism.

We can make theories play the roles of competing characters:

In contrast to **creationism**, the theory of evolution shares its intellectual foundations with **many other theories**. As a result, **creationism** will displace **evolutionary theory** only when it can first prove that the foundations of **all those other theories** are false.

We can see how pairs of sentences like these tell the “same” story in different ways if we start with a story that seems clear and then change the way it represents characters and their actions:

Though the Governor knew that the cities needed new revenues to improve schools, he vetoed the budget bill because he wanted to encourage cities to increase local taxes.

What’s the story here, which is to say, who are the characters and what are they doing? The characters are the Governor, the cities, and the schools (the legislature is also in there, but hidden). The Governor is part of three actions: he *knew* something, he *vetoed* a bill, and he *will encourage* the cities; the cities are part of three actions: they *need* revenues, they [should] *improve* schools, and

they [should] *increase* taxes; and the schools are part of one action: they will be *improved*. Those six actions are all represented by the same part of speech—they are all verbs. And that part of speech—the verb—is singularly important to why we think that this sentence about the Governor and the schools is reasonably clear.

Before you read on, rewrite that story, but instead of using those six verbs to express actions, use their noun forms. Three of the noun forms are different from the verbs: *to know* → *knowledge*, *to encourage* → *encouragement*, *to improve* → *improvement*. The other three nouns are identical to their corresponding verbs: *to need* → *the need*, *to veto* → *the veto*, *to increase* → *the increase*.

Here is a version using nouns instead of verbs. Yours may differ.

Despite his **knowledge** of the **need** by cities for new revenues for the **improvement** of their schools, the Governor executed a **veto** of the budget bill to give **encouragement** to the cities for an **increase** of local taxes.

At some level of meaning, this sentence offers the same story as the original. But at another level—at the level of how readers perceive voice, style, clarity, ease of understanding—it is different; for most of us, I hope, worse.

It is in this difference between the ways we can tell the “same” story that we locate the first principles of clear writing (which is to say, you will recall, writing that makes the reader feel clear about what he is reading).

### The First Two Principles of Clear Writing

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

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

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

Look again at (1b):

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

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

Now look at (1a):

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

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

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

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

the committee had allocated.

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

areas that most needed assistance.

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

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

The principle also gives us some simple advice about revising: When your prose feels turgid, abstract, too complex, do two

things. First, locate the cast of characters and the actions that those characters perform (or are the objects of). If you find that those characters are not subjects and their actions are not verbs, revise so that they are.

But even when we don’t feel anything wrong with our own prose, others often do, so we ought to do something that will let us anticipate that judgment. A quick method is simply to run a line under the first five or six words of every sentence. If you find that (1) you have to go more than six or seven words into a sentence to get past the subject to the verb and (2) the subject of the sentence is not one of your characters, take a hard look at that sentence; its characters and actions probably do not align with subjects and verbs. (If you want to do a more exact and thorough analysis, underline the subject of every verb, even those in subordinate clauses.) Then simply revise the sentence so that characters appear as subjects and their actions as verbs.

In some cases, we exclude characters altogether. If we had the context of this next passage, we might know who was doing what:

The argument that failure to provide for preservation of the royalty rate upon expiration of the patent discouraged challenges to the contract does not apply here.

Presumably, the writer knew who was arguing, failing, challenging—though often those who write like this in fact do not know. If we invent characters as if we knew who they were and make them subjects and their actions verbs, we can revise this sentence as we have others:

Harris argues that when Smith gave him no way to preserve the royalty rate when the patent expired, Smith discouraged him from challenging their contract. But that argument does not apply here.

Some readers may think that I am simply giving the standard advice about avoiding passive verbs. As we’ll see in a few pages, that’s not bad advice, but nothing we have seen so far has anything directly to do with passive verbs. In fact, not one of the “bad” examples in this chapter so far has in it a single passive verb. The bad examples “feel” passive, but that feeling does not arise from passive verbs but rather from abstract nouns and missing characters.

### Some Stylistic Consequences

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

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

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

There has been an affirmative decision for program termination.

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

*The Director* decided to terminate the program.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The partners committed an unfair labor practice when they closed the branch and transferred its business and nonunionized em-

ployees in order to discourage unionization and thereby obtain an economic benefit.

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

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

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

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

- You may have been told to write short sentences.

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

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

I should clarify an often misunderstood point: clear writing does not require Dick-and-Jane sentences. Almost all of the revisions are shorter than the originals, but the objective is not curtiness: what counts is not the number of words in a sentence, but how easily we get from beginning to end while understanding everything in between. This was written by an undergraduate attempting academic sophistication:

After Czar Alexander II’s emancipation of the Russian serfs in 1861, many now-free peasants chose to live on a commune 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 a low

economic status on the peasants, which resulted in their reduction to near-poverty, a centuries-long history of important social distinctions even among serfs prevented social equalization.

In his struggle to follow the principles we've covered here, he revised that paragraph into a primer style:

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 because even serfs had made important social distinctions among themselves for centuries.

In Chapter 7 we discuss some ways to manage long sentences. As we'll see there, some of those same techniques suggest ways to change a series of too-short, too-simple sentences into a style that is more complex, more mature, but still readable. Applying those principles, 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 among themselves important social distinctions.

As we might expect, the principles of aligning characters with subjects and actions with verbs have exceptions. We will see later how we must choose *which* character from among many to make the subject and *which* action to make the verb. At this point, though, we can represent our two principles simply and graphically:

FIXED	SUBJECT	VERB	COMPLEMENT
VARIABLE	CHARACTERS	ACTION	—

As we read a sentence, we have to integrate two levels of its structure: one is its predictable grammatical sequence: Subject + Verb + Complement; the other level is its story, a level of meaning whose parts have no fixed order: Characters + Actions. To a significant degree, we judge a style to be clear or unclear according to how consistently a writer aligns those two levels. We usually feel we are reading prose that is clear, direct, and readable when a writer consistently expresses the crucial actions of her story in verbs and her central characters (real or abstract) in their subjects. We usually feel that we are reading prose that is gummy, abstract, and difficult when a writer unnecessarily dislocates actions from verbs and (almost by necessity) locates her characters away from subjects, or deletes them entirely. There are details about these principles worth examining.

### Subjects and Characters

There are many kinds of characters. The most important are agents, the direct source of an action or condition. There are collective agents:

Faculties of national eminence do not always teach well.

secondary or remote agents:

Mayor Daley built Chicago into a giant among cities.

and even figurative agents that stand for the real agents:

The White House announced today the President's schedule.

The business sector is cooperating.

Many instances of malignant tumors fail to seek attention.

In some sentences, we use subjects to name things that are really the means, the instrument by which some unstated agent performs an action, making the instrument seem like the agent of that action.

Studies of coal production reveal these figures.

These new data establish the need for more detailed analysis.

This evidence proves my theory.

That is,

When we study coal production, we find these figures.

I have established through these new data that we must analyze the problem in more detail.

With this evidence I prove my theory.

In the original sentences, the instruments act so much like agents that there is little point in revising them.

Some characters do not appear in a sentence at all, so that when we revise, we have to supply them:

In the last sentence of the Gettysburg Address there is a rallying cry for the continuation of the struggle.

In the last sentence of the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln rallied his audience to continue the struggle against the South.

In other sentences, the writer may imply a character in an adjective:

Determination of policy occurs at the **presidential** level.

**The President** determines policy.

Medieval **theological** debates often addressed what to **modern** thought seems to be metaphysical triviality.

Medieval **theologians** often debated issues that **we** might think were metaphysically trivial.

And in some cases, the characters and their actions are so far removed from the surface of a sentence that if we want to be explicit, we have to recast the sentence entirely.

There seems to be no obvious reason that would account for the apparent unavailability of evidence relevant to the failure of this problem to yield to standard solutions.

I do not know why **my staff** cannot find evidence to explain why we haven't been able to solve this problem in the ways **we** have before.

Most often, though, characters in abstract prose modify one of those abstract nouns or are objects of prepositions such as *by*, *of*, *on the part of*:

The **Federalists' belief** that the instability *of government* was a consequence *of popular democracy* was based on their belief in the tendency *on the part of factions* to further **their self-interest** at the expense of the common good.

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

Often, we have to supply indefinite subjects, because the sentence expresses a general statement:

Such multivariate strategies may be of more use in understanding the genetic factors which contribute to vulnerability to psychiatric disorders than strategies based on the assumption that the presence or absence of psychopathology is dependent on a major gene or than strategies in which a single biological variable is studied.

If **we/one/researchers** are to understand the genetic factors that make some patients vulnerable to psychiatric disorders, **we/one/researchers** should use multivariate strategies rather than strategies in which **we/one/researchers** study only a single biological variable.

As flexible as English is, it does have a problem with indefinite subjects. Unlike writers of French, who have available an impersonal pronoun that does not seem excessively formal, English has no convenient indefinite pronoun. In this book, we have used **we** quite freely, because parts of this book are written by two people. But many readers dislike the royal **we** when used by a single writer, because they think it pretentious. Even when used by two or more writers, it can be misleading because it includes too many referents: the writer, the reader, and an indefinite number of others. As a consequence, many writers slip back into nominalizations or, as we shall see in a bit, passive verbs:

If the generic factors that make some patients vulnerable to psychiatric disorders are to be understood, multivariate strategies should be used rather than strategies in which it is assumed that a major gene causes psychopathology or strategies in which only a single biological variable is studied.

### Verbs and Actions

As we'll use the word here, "action" will cover not only physical movement, but also mental processes, feelings, relationships, literal or figurative. In these next four sentences, the meaning becomes clearer as the verbs become more specific:

There has been effective staff information dissemination control on the part of the Secretary.

The Secretary has exercised effective staff information dissemination control.

The Secretary has effectively controlled staff information dissemination.

The Secretary has effectively controlled how his staff disseminates information.

The crucial actions aren't *be* or *exercise*, but *control* and *disseminate*.

Most writers of turgid prose typically use a verb not to express action but merely to state that an action exists.

A *need* exists for greater candidate *selection efficiency*. = We *must select* candidates more efficiently.

There is the *possibility* of prior *approval* of it. = He *may approve* of it ahead of time.

We *conducted* an *investigation* of it. = We *investigated* it.

A *review* was done of the regulations. = They *reviewed* the regulations

There is a technical term for a noun derived from a verb or an adjective. It is called a *nominalization*. Nominalization is itself a noun derived from a verb, *nominalize*. Here are some examples:

Verb →	Nominalization	Adjective →	Nominalization
discover	discovery	careless	carelessness
move	movement	difficult	difficulty
resist	resistance	different	difference
react	reaction	elegant	elegance
fail	failure	applicable	applicability
refuse	refusal	intense	intensity

Some nominalizations are identical to their corresponding verb: *hope* → *hope*, *charge* → *charge*, *result* → *result*, *answer* → *answer*, *repair* → *repair*, *return* → *return*.

Our *request* is that on your *return*, you conduct a *review* of the data and provide an immediate *report*.

We *request* that when you *return*, you *review* the data and *report* immediately.

*Nominalization* might sound like jargon, but it's a useful term.

### Looking for Nominalizations

A few patterns of useless nominalizations are easy to spot and revise.

1. When the nominalization follows a verb with little specific meaning, change the nominalization to a verb that can replace the empty verb.

The police *conducted* an *investigation* into the matter.

The police *investigated* the matter.

The committee *has* no *expectation* that it will meet the deadline.

The committee does not *expect* to meet the deadline.

2. When the nominalization follows *there is* or *there are*, change the nominalization to a verb and find a subject:

*There* is a *need* for further study of this program.

*The engineering staff* *must* study this program further.

*There* was considerable erosion of the land from the floods.

*The floods* considerably eroded the land.

3. When the nominalization is the subject of an empty verb, change the nominalization to a verb and find a new subject:

The *intention* of the IRS *is* to audit the records of the program.

The IRS *intends* to audit the records of the program.

*Our discussion* *concerned* a tax cut.

*We discussed* a tax cut.

4. When you find consecutive nominalizations, turn the first one into a verb. Then either leave the second or turn it into a verb in a clause beginning with *how* or *why*:

*There* was first a *review* of the *evolution* of the dorsal fin.

*First*, she *reviewed* the *evolution* of the dorsal fin.

*First*, she *reviewed how* the dorsal fin evolved.

5. We have to revise more extensively when a nominalization in a subject is linked to a second nominalization in the predicate by a verb or phrase that logically connects them:

Subject: Their cessation of hostilities

Logical connection: was because of

Object: their personnel losses.

To revise such sentences,

- (a) Change abstractions to verbs: *cessation* → *cease*, *loss* → *lose*.
  - (b) Find subjects for those verbs: *they ceased*, *they lost*.
  - (c) Link the new clauses with a word that expresses their logical connection. That connection will typically be some kind of causal relationship;
- To express simple cause:      *because, since, when*  
 To express conditional cause: *if, provided that, so long as*  
 To contradict expected cause: *though, although, unless.*

Schematically, we do this:

Their cessation of hostilities	→	they ceased hostilities
was because of	→	because
their personnel loss	→	they lost personnel

More examples:

The discovery of a method for the **manufacture** of artificial skin *will have the result* of an increase in the survival of patients with radical burns.

- Researchers **discover** how to **manufacture** artificial skin
- More patients **will survive** radical burns

*If* researchers can discover how to **manufacture** artificial skin, more patients **will survive** radical burns.

The presence of extensive rust **damage** to exterior surfaces *prevented* immediate repairs to the hull.

- Rust had extensively **damaged** the exterior surfaces
- We could not **repair** the hull immediately

*Because* rust had extensively **damaged** the exterior surfaces, we could not **repair** the hull immediately.

The **instability** of the motor housing *did not preclude* the completion of the field trials.

- The motor housing was **unstable**
- The research staff **completed** field trials

*Even though* the motor housing was **unstable**, the research staff completed the field trials.

### Useful Nominalizations

In some cases, nominalizations are useful, even necessary. Don't revise these.

1. The nominalization is a subject referring to a previous sentence:

These arguments all depend on a single unproven claim.  
 This decision can lead to costly consequences.

These nominalizations let us link sentences into a more cohesive flow.

2. The nominalization names what would be the object of its verb:

I do not understand either **her meaning** or **his intention**.

This is a bit more compact than, "I do not understand either **what she means** or **what he intends**."

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

The fact that I denied what he accused me of impressed the jury.  
 My denial of his accusations impressed the jury.

But then, why not

When I denied his accusations, I impressed the jury.

4. Some nominalizations refer to an often repeated concept.

Few issues have so divided Americans 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.

In these sentences, the nominalization names concepts that we refer to repeatedly: *abortion on demand*, *Amendment*, *election*, *taxation*, *representation*, *Revolution*. Rather than repeatedly spell out a familiar concept in a full clause, we contract it into a noun. In these cases, the abstractions often become virtual actors.

And, of course, some nominalizations refer to ideas that we can express only in nominalizations: *freedom*, *death*, *love*, *hope*, *life*, *wisdom*. If we couldn't turn some verbs or adjectives into nouns, we would find it difficult—perhaps impossible—to discuss those subjects that have preoccupied us for millennia. You simply have to develop an eye—or an ear—for the nominalization that expresses one of these ideas and the 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.

5. We often use a nominalization after *there is/are* to introduce a topic that we develop in subsequent sentences (as distinct from an isolated *there is* + nominalization, see p. 31):

*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*<sup>4</sup>

(Of course, we might also consider revising those first two sentences into “Language changes, and such changes are both inevitable and sometimes desirable. But there is such a thing as good English and correct English.”)

6. And sometimes our topic seems so abstract that we think we can write about it only in nominalizations. Here are two passages about an abstract principle of law. In the first, the abstract nominalization *recovery in equity* acts virtually as a character. It “requires,” it “recovers,” it “relaxes,” just as a real character might.

In comparison to the statutory method of recovery, there are certain advantages in the equitable right of recovery. **Recovery in equity** does not require strict compliance with statutory requirements. Because **equitable recovery** can be tailored to the particular controversy, it allows one to recover greater or lesser amounts. A **statutory action for the recovery of rents** can recover only the value of use and occupation exclusive of improvements to the property. An **equity action**, on the other hand, can recover rents based upon the value of the property with the defendant’s improvements thereupon. **Proceedings in equity** also relax the evidentiary standard. Most importantly, unlike the statutory method, **recovery in equity** does not demand one year of possession prior to suit. Both statutory and equitable remedies, however, require the same standard of good faith.

But we can explain the same concepts using subject/characters and verb/actions.

In comparison to the statutory method, a plaintiff will find certain advantages through an equitable right of recovery. In recovery in equity, the plaintiff need not strictly comply with statutory requirements. Because he can tailor recovery to the equities of the controversy, he may be able to recover greater or lesser amounts. In a statutory action regarding the recovery of rents, a plaintiff can recover only the value of use and occupation exclusive of improvements to the property. On the other hand, under recovery in equity, the plaintiff can recover rents based upon the value of the property with the defendant’s improvements thereupon. In proceedings in equity, the court may also relax the evidentiary standard. Most importantly, unlike the statutory method, in recovery in equity the plaintiff does not have to possess the land one year prior to suit. In both statutory and equitable remedies, however, the court requires the same standard of good faith.

Other passages do not lend themselves to revision so easily (I boldface the nominalizations and italicize the characters).

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. Taken together these cognitive mechanisms are highly complex. The folk psychological notion of belief, however, is an attitude that permits limited complexity of content. Thus the cognitive component of intention is something other than folk psychological belief.

—Myles Brand, *Intending and Acting*<sup>5</sup>

Translated into an agent-action style, this passage loses something of its generality, some would say its philosophical import. Only its author could judge whether our translation has misrepresented his argument.

I argue like this: When *an actor* intends anything, *he* behaves in ways that are cognitively complex. We may divide these ways into two temporal modes: *He* intends prospectively or immediately.

When *an actor* intends prospectively, *he* cognitively represents to himself what *he* has done similarly in the past, his current situation, and how *he* intends to act in the future. That is, when *an actor* intends prospectively, *he* plans. On the other hand, when *an actor* plans what *he* intends to do immediately, *he* monitors and guides his body as *he* moves it. When *we* take these two cognitive components together, *we* see that they are highly complex. But our beliefs about these matters on the basis of folk psychology are too simple. When *we* consider the cognitive component of intention in this way, *we* see that *we* have to think in ways other than folk psychology.

This passage illustrates the problem with finding an impersonal subject. Should *we/one/the writer/you* use as subjects *we, one, he, philosophers, anyone?*

### Passives and Agents

In addition to avoiding abstract nominalizations, you can make your style more direct if you also avoid unnecessary passive verbs. In active sentences, the subject typically expresses the agent of an action, and the object expresses the goal or the thing changed by the action:

subject	object
Active: The partners → broke → the agreement.	
agent	goal

In passive sentences, the subject expresses the goal of an action; a form of *be* precedes a past participle form of the verb; and the agent of the action may or may not be expressed in a *by*-phrase:

subject	be (past participle)	prepositional phrase
Passive: The agreement ← was broken ← by the partners.		
goal		agent

We can usually make our style more vigorous and direct if we avoid both nominalizations and unnecessary passive verbs. Compare:

A new approach to toxic waste management detailed in a chemical industry plan will be submitted. A method of decomposing toxic by-products of refinery processes has been discovered by Genco Chemical.

The chemical industry will submit a plan that details a new way to manage toxic waste. Genco Chemical has discovered a way to decompose toxic by-products of refinery processes.

Active sentences encourage us to name the specific agent of an action and avoid a few extra words—a form of *be* and, when we preserve the agent of the action, the preposition *by*. Because the passive also reverses the direct order of agent-action-goal, passives eventually cripple the easy flow of an otherwise energetic style. Compare these passages:

It was found that data concerning energy resources allocated to the states were not obtained. This action is needed so that a determination of redirection is permitted on a timely basis when weather conditions change. A system must be established so that data on weather conditions and fuel consumption may be gathered on a regular basis.

We found that the Department of Energy did not obtain data about energy resources that Federal offices were allocating to the states. The Department needs these data so that it can determine how to redirect these resources when conditions change. The Secretary of the Department must establish a system so that his office can gather data on weather conditions and fuel consumption on a regular basis.

The second passage is a bit longer, but more specific and more straightforward. We know who is supposed to be doing what.

When we combine passives with nominalizations, we create that wretched prose we call legalese, sociologalese, educationalese, bureaucratese—all of the -eses of those who confuse authority and objectivity with polysyllabic abstraction and remote impersonality:

Patient movement to less restrictive methods of care may be followed by increased probability of recovery.

If we treat patients less restrictively, they may recover faster.

But those are the easy generalizations. In many other cases, we may find that the passive is, in fact, the better choice.

### Choosing between Active and Passive

To choose between the active and the passive, we have to answer two questions: First, must our audience know who is per-

forming the action? Second, are we maintaining a logically consistent string of subjects? And third, if the string of subjects is consistent, is it the right string of subjects?

Often, we avoid stating who is responsible for an action, because we don't know or don't care, or because we'd just rather not say:

Those who are found guilty of murder can be executed.

Valuable records should always be kept in a fireproof safe.

In sentences like these, the passive is the natural and correct choice. In this next sentence, we might also predict the passive, but for a different reason, one having to do with avoiding responsibility:

Because the final safety inspection was neither performed nor monitored, the brake plate assembly mechanism was left incorrectly aligned, a fact that was known several months before it was decided to publicly reveal that information.

This kind of writing raises issues more significant than mere clarity.

The second consideration is more complex: it is whether the subjects in a sequence of sentences are consistent. Look again at the subjects in the pair of paragraphs about energy (p. 37). In the first version, the subjects of the passive sentences seem to be chosen almost at random.

It . . . information . . . This action . . . a determination . . . A system . . . information . . .

In the second, the active sentences give the reader a consistent point of view; the writer "stages" the sentences from a consistent string of subjects, in this case the agents of the action:

We . . . Department of Energy . . . Federal offices . . . the Department . . . it . . . the Secretary . . . his office. . . .

Now each agent-subject anchors the reader in something familiar at the beginning of the sentence—the cast of characters—before the reader moves on to something new.

If in a series of passive sentences, you find yourself shifting from one unrelated subject to another, try rewriting those sentences in the active voice. Use the beginning of your sentence to orient your reader to what follows. If in a series of sentences you

give your reader no consistent starting point, then that stretch of writing may well seem disjointed.

If, however, you can make your sequence of subjects appropriately consistent, then choose the passive. In this next passage, the writer wanted to write about the end of World War II from the point of view of Germany and Japan. So in each of her sentences, she put Germany and Japan into the subject of a verb, regardless of whether the verb was active or passive:

By March of 1945, the Axis nations had been essentially defeated; all that remained was a final, but bloody, climax. The borders of Germany 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.

If, however, she had wanted to write about the end of the war from the point of view of the Allied nations, she would have chosen the active:

By March of 1945, the Allies had essentially defeated the Axis nations; all that remained was a final, but bloody, climax. American, French, and British forces had breached the borders of Germany and were bombing both Germany and Japan around the clock. But they had not so thoroughly devastated either country as to destroy its ability to resist.

We will return to this matter in Chapter 3.

### The Institutional Passive

When we try to revise passives in official and academic prose, we often run into a problem, because many editors and teachers believe that passages such as the following are stylistically improper (each comes from the opening of articles published in quite respectable journals):

This paper is concerned with two problems. How can we best handle, in a transformational grammar (i) Restrictions. . . . To illustrate (i), we may cite . . . we shall show . . .

Since the pituitary-adrenal axis is activated during the acute phase response, we have investigated the potential role . . . Specifically, we have studied the effects of interleukin-1 . . .

Any study of tensions presupposes some acquaintance with certain findings of child psychology. We may begin by inquiring whether . . . we should next proceed to investigate.

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

. . . we want . . . Survival gives . . . We examine . . . We compare . . . We have used . . . Each has been weighted . . . We merely take . . . They are subject . . . We use . . . Efron and Morris (3) describe . . . We observed . . . We might find . . . We know. . .<sup>6</sup>

Certainly, scholars in different fields write in different ways. And in all fields, some scholarly writers and editors resolutely avoid the first person everywhere. But if they claim that all good academic writing in all fields must always be impersonally third-person, always passive, they are wrong.

### Metadiscourse: Writing about Writing

We now must explain, however, that when academic and scholarly writers do use the first person, they use it for particular purposes. Note the verbs in the passages cited: *cite, show, begin by inquiring, compare*. The writers are referring to their acts of writing or arguing, and are using what we shall call *metadiscourse*.

Metadiscourse is the language we use when, in writing about some subject matter, we incidentally refer to the act and to the context of writing about it. We use metadiscourse verbs to announce that in what follows we will *explain, show, argue, claim, deny, describe, suggest, contrast, add, expand, summarize*. We use metadiscourse to list the parts or steps in our presentation: *first, second, third, finally*; to express our logical connections: *infer, support, prove, illustrate, therefore, in conclusion, however, on the other hand*. We hedge how certain we are by writing *it seems that, perhaps, I believe, probably*, etc. Though metadiscourse does not refer to what we are primarily saying about our subject, we need some metadiscourse in everything we write.

If scholarly writers use the first person at all, they predictably use *I* or *we* in introductions, where they announce their intentions in metadiscourse: *We claim that, We shall show, We begin by examining*. If writers use metadiscourse at the beginning of a piece, they often use it again at the end, when they review what they have done: *We have suggested, I have shown that, We have, however, not claimed*. Less often, scholarly writers use the first person to refer to their most general actions involved in research-

ing their problem. This is not metadiscourse when it applies to the acts of research: *we investigate, study, examine, compare, know, analyze, review, evaluate, assess, find, discover*.

Academic and scientific writers rarely use the first person when they refer to particular actions. We are unlikely to find passages such as this:

To determine if monokines directly elicited an adrenal steroidogenic response, I added monocyte-conditioned medium and purified preparations of . . .

Far more likely is the original sentence:

To determine if monokines directly elicited an adrenal steroidogenic response, monocyte-conditioned medium and purified preparations . . . were added to cultures . . .

Note that when the writer wrote this sentence in the passive, he unselfconsciously dangled his modifier:

To determine . . . medium and purified preparations were added . . .

The implied subject of the verb *determine* is *I* or *we; I determine*. But that implied subject *I* or *we* differs from *medium and purified preparations*, the explicit subject of the main verb *added*. And thus dangles the modifier: the implied subject of the introductory phrase differs from the explicit subject of the clause.

Writers of scientific prose use this pattern so often that it has become standard usage in scientific English. The few editors who have stern views on these matters object, of course. But if they do, they must accept first-person subjects. If they both deprive their authors of a first-person subject and rule out dangling modifiers, they put their writers into a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't predicament.

As a small historical footnote, we might add that this impersonal "scientific" style is a modern development. In his "New Theory of Light and Colors" (1672), Sir Isaac Newton wrote this rather charming account of an early experiment:

I procured a triangular glass prism, to try therewith the celebrated phenomena of colors. And for that purpose, having darkened my laboratory, and made a small hole in my window shade, to let in a convenient quantity of the sun's light, I placed my prism at the entrance, that the light might be thereby refracted to the opposite

wall. It was at first a very pleasing diversion to view the vivid and intense colors produced thereby.

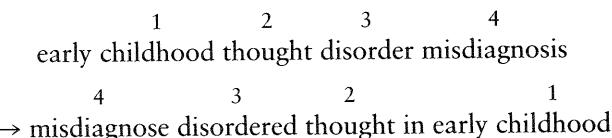
### Noun + Noun + Noun

A last habit of style that often keep us from making the connections between our ideas explicit is the unnecessarily long compound noun phrase:

**Early childhood thought disorder misdiagnosis** often occurs because of unfamiliarity with recent research literature describing such conditions. This paper reviews seven recent studies of particular relevance to preteen hyperactivity diagnosis and to treatment modalities involving medication maintenance level evaluation procedures.

Some grammarians insist that we should never use one noun to modify another, but that would rule out common phrases like *stone wall* or *student committee*. And if we ruled out such phrases, writers of technical prose would be unable to compact into a single phrase complex thoughts that they would otherwise have to repeat in longer constructions. If a writer must refer several times in an article to the idea behind *medication maintenance level evaluation procedures*, then repeating that phrase is marginally better than repeating *procedures to evaluate ways to maintain levels of medication*. In less technical writing, though, compounds like these seem awkward or, worse, ambiguous, especially when they include nominalizations.

So, whenever you find in your writing a string of nouns that you have never read before and that you probably will not use again, try disassembling them. Start from the last and reverse their order, even linking them with prepositional phrases, if necessary. If one of the nouns is a nominalization, change it into a verb. Here is the first compound in the example passage revised:



(Now we can see the ambiguity: what's early, the childhood, the disorder, or the diagnosis?) Then reassemble into a sentence:

Physicians are misdiagnosing disordered thought in young children because they are not familiar with the literature on recent research.

### Summing Up

1. Express actions and conditions in specific verbs, adverbs, or adjectives:

The intention of the committee is the improvement of morale.

The committee intends to improve morale.

2. When appropriate, make the subjects of your verbs characters involved in those actions.

A decision on the part of the Dean about funding by the Department of its 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.

We can sum up these principles in the diagram we offered on p. 26.

FIXED	SUBJECT	VERB	COMPLEMENT
VARIABLE	CHARACTERS	ACTION	—

To the degree that we consistently expresses the crucial actions of our story in verbs and our central characters (real or abstract) in subjects, our readers are likely to feel our prose is clear and direct. This, however, is only the first step toward clear, direct, and *coherent* writing.