

Clearer sentences—Part 2

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My last column began a two-part series on clearer sentences based on Joseph M. Williams' vade mecum *STYLE Toward Clarity and Grace*. Part 1 introduced and developed Williams' first two principles of clear writing: subjects=characters and verbs=their actions. In clear sentences, the subjects and verbs overlay the characters and actions.

Subject and characters. There are many types of characters. The most important and clearest are direct agents, the obvious source of the action: *We initiated this project ...*

Sometimes the subjects name a means by which an unstated character performs an action: *Studies of fault traps show that ...* which really means: People who study fault traps, find that ...

("Studies" takes the role of a character and that's clear enough). In poor sentences, however, characters are typically not explicit, and a review is required to bring them to light. In extreme cases, the characters may be so deeply buried below the surface that only the authors can revise and extract them from obscurity. The reconstruction of these sentences is the bane of all reviewers and editors.

Verbs and action. "Action" means more than physical movement; it includes mental processes, feeling, relationships, etc. The following four-sentence progression becomes clearer as the verbs become more specific. Note also the improved clarity when the subject aligns with the character.

There has been effective member information dissemination control on the part of the consortium.

The consortium has exercised effective member information dissemination control.

The consortium has effectively controlled member information dissemination.

The consortium has effectively controlled how members disseminate information.

The crucial actions were not *been* or *exercised*, the verbs unnecessarily introduced in the first two sentences, but *controlled* and *disseminate*.

Weak sentences use verbs not to express action, but to state that an action occurred. Consider *We conducted an investigation into the causes* versus *We investigated the causes*. The first sentence exemplifies a common cause of unclear sentences: nominalization, whereby the action is expressed by a verb in noun form; e.g., *discovery* instead of *to discover*, *movement* for *to move*, etc.

Too many writers use nominalization to make their text sound scholarly. In reality, all it does is obscure the action, disconnecting it from the character. Therefore, whenever possible, use verbs to express actions for clearer sentences.

Good and bad nominalization. Williams gives guidelines for finding useless nominalizations and revising them.

- 1) When the nominalization follows a verb with little specific meaning, change the nominalization to a verb that replaces the empty verb:

Our group conducted a study of the region.

Our group studied the region.

- 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 investigation of the region.
The geophysics staff must investigate the region.

- 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 proposal is to study the region.
The geophysics staff proposes to study the region.

- 4) When you find consecutive nominalizations, turn the first into a verb and 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 investigation of the region.
First, the geophysics staff reviewed the investigation of the region.

- 5) When a nominalization in a subject is linked to a second nominalization in a predicate by a verb or phrase that logically connects them, revise extensively, including finding subjects:

The cessation of the investigation was caused by a funding loss.
The geophysics staff ceased investigating because they lost funding.

To be fair, not all nominalizations create poor or abstract sentences. Some useful instances are:

- 1) The nominalization is a subject referring to a previous sentence:

The investigation showed that ...

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

We do not understand either his assumptions or his conclusions. ... which is more compact than saying... either what he assumed or what he concluded.

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

The fact that we reject what he found is ...
Our rejection of his findings is ...

Passives and agents. Avoid the passive voice whenever possible. In passive sentences the subject expresses the goal of an action, and the agent of the action may be expressed by a phrase beginning with *by*; e.g., *An investigation of the region was done by the geophysics group.* An

active version would read: *The geophysics group investigated the region.*

Active sentences encourage you to name the agent of an action and avoid extra words. Because the passive voice reverses the order of agent-action-goal, it can cripple the flow of a dynamic style. Compare the following passages:

It was found that data concerning allocated energy resources 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.

We found that DOE had not obtained data about energy resources that Federal offices allocated to the states. DOE needs these data so that it can determine how to redirect these resources when weather conditions change.

The passive voice is vague, while the active voice is straightforward and gives specific information.

There is, of course, a place and time for choosing passive over active, and this will be the topic of a future column. However, as a general rule, when we combine unnecessary passives with nominalizations, we end up

with those ponderous passages so typical of legalese and techno-babble. It is definitely much easier to violate Williams' principles for clearer sentences using passive.

Your goal until next time. To check for clarity in your writing try the following. Go through one of your texts sentence by sentence, identify subjects and their verbs, then identify the characters and their actions. Are the characters and actions easy to identify? (Would they be as easy to identify for your readers?) Once identified, do subjects = characters and verbs = actions? If they do, you are probably writing clear sentences. If not, rewrite the sentences accordingly.

Next look for nominalizations (i.e., mainly words ending in "-tion"). Are they necessary or can they be replaced with verbs? This exercise will save a lot of time and red ink if someone else edits your copy. Finally, avoid trying to "sound" important; just tell your story in simple and clear terms. ¶

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