

## Lesson

## 2

## Actions

*Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly.*

*Everything that can be said can be said clearly.*

—LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

## UNDERSTANDING HOW WE MAKE JUDGMENTS

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

1a. The cause of our schools' failure at teaching basic skills is not understanding the influence of cultural background on learning.

1b. Our schools have failed to teach basic skills because they do not understand how cultural background influences the way a child learns.

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

The problem is to understand what is *in* those two sentences that makes readers feel as they do. Only then can you rise above your too-good understanding of your own writing to know when readers will think it needs revising. To do that, you have to know what counts as a well-told story.

## TELLING STORIES ABOUT CHARACTERS AND THEIR ACTIONS

It is easy to state the most general principle for clear sentences: Make the main character in your sentence its subject and make its important actions verbs. This story doesn't do that:

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

We prefer a sentence closer to this:

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

Most readers think (2b) tells its story more clearly than (2a), because it follows two principles that (2a) ignores:

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

## Principle of Clarity 1: Make Main Characters Subjects

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

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

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

SUBJECT	VERB
a <b>walk</b> through the woods	was taking place
the <i>Wolf's</i> <b>jump</b> out from behind a tree	occurred

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

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

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

### Principle of Clarity 2: Make Important Actions Verbs

Now look at how the actions and verbs differ in (2a): its actions (boldfaced) are not in verbs (capitalized):

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

Note how vague those verbs are: *was taking*, *occurred*. In (2b), the clearer sentence, the verbs name specific actions:

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

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

## FAIRY TALES AND ACADEMIC WRITING

Fairy tales may seem distant from writing in college or on the job, but they're not, because most sentences are still about characters doing things. Compare these two:

- 3a. The Federalists' argument in regard to the destabilization of government by popular democracy was based on their belief in the tendency of factions to further their self-interest at the expense of the common good.
- ✓ 3b. The Federalists argued that popular democracy destabilized government, because they believed that factions tended to further their self-interest at the expense of the common good.

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

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

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

Second, most of the actions (boldfaced) are not verbs (capitalized), but abstract nouns. And neither verb is an action.

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

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

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

Readers think (3b) is clearer for two reasons: first, its characters (italicized) are subjects (underlined) and its actions (bold-faced) are verbs (capitalized).

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

Note as well that all those whole subjects are short, specific, and concrete:

WHOLE SUBJECT/CHARACTER	VERB/ACTION
the Federalists	argued
popular democracy	destabilized
they	believed
factions	tended to further

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

### VERBS AND ACTIONS

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

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

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

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

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

A noun derived from a verb or adjective has a technical name: *nominalization*. The word illustrates its meaning: when we

nominalize the verb *nominalize*, we create the nominalization *nominalization*. A few examples:

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

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

She flies → her flying      We sang → our singing

Some nominalizations and verbs are identical:

hope → hope      result → result      repair → repair

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

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

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

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

subject	verb	object
We	discussed	the problem.
doer	action	

But it is not true for this almost synonymous sentence:

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

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

No element of style more characterizes turgid academic and professional writing, writing that feels abstract, indirect, and difficult than lots of nominalizations, *especially in the subjects of verbs*.

## DIAGNOSIS AND REVISION: CHARACTERS AND ACTIONS

You can use the principles of verbs as actions and subjects as characters to explain why your readers judge your prose as they do. More important, you can also use them to identify and revise sentences that seem clear to you but will not to your readers. Revision is a three-step process: diagnose, analyze, and rewrite.

### 1. Diagnose

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

The outsourcing of high-tech work to Asia by corporations means the loss of jobs for many American workers.

- b. Then look for two results:

- You underlined abstract nouns as simple subjects.

The outsourcing of high-tech work to Asia by corporations means the loss of jobs for many American workers.

- You underlined seven or eight words before getting to a verb.

The outsourcing of high-tech work to Asia by corporations (10 words) MEANS the loss of jobs for many American workers.

### 2. Analyze

- a. Decide who your main characters are, particularly flesh-and-blood ones (more about this in the next lesson).

The outsourcing of high-tech work to Asia by **corporations** means the loss of jobs for **many American workers**.

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

The **outsourcing** of high-tech work to Asia by corporations means the **loss** of jobs for many American workers.

### 3. Rewrite

- a. If the actions are nominalizations, make them verbs.

outsourcing → outsource      loss → lose

- b. Make the characters the subjects of those verbs.

corporations outsource      American workers lose

- c. Rewrite the sentence with subordinating conjunctions such as *because, if, when, although, why, how, whether, or that*.

Many middle-class American workers are losing their jobs, **because** corporations are outsourcing their high-tech work to Asia.

## SOME COMMON PATTERNS

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

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

The **consideration** of the issue by the committee OCCURRED last week.

- a. Change the nominalization to a verb:

consideration → consider

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

The **consideration** of the issue by *the committee* OCCURRED last week.

- c. Make that character the subject of the verb:

*The committee* **CONSIDERED** the issue last week.

**2. The nominalization follows an empty verb:**

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

## a. Change the nominalization to a verb:

investigation → investigate

## b. Replace the empty verb with the new verb:

conducted → investigated

The *agency* INVESTIGATED the matter.

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

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

## a. Revise the nominalizations into verbs:

loss → lose                      expansion → expand

## b. Identify the characters that would be the subjects of those verbs:

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

## c. Make those characters subjects of those verbs:

we lose                      they expand

## d. Link the new clauses with a logical connection:

- To express simple cause: *because, since, when*
- To express conditional cause: *if, provided that, so long as*
- To contradict expected causes: *though, although, unless*

We LOST sales because *they* EXPANDED *their* outlets.

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

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

## a. Change the nominalization to a verb:

need → need                      study → study

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

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

## c. Make that character the subject of the verb:

no need → we need not                      our study → we study

We **NEED** not **STUDY** this problem further.

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

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

## a. Turn the first nominalization into a verb:

review → review

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

evolution of the brain → how the brain evolved

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

✓ First, we **REVIEWED** how *the brain* **EVOLVED**.

**SOME HAPPY CONSEQUENCES**

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

## 1. Your sentences are more concrete. Compare:

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

✓ *The director* **DECIDED** to **EXPAND** the program.

2. Your sentences are more concise. When you use nominalizations, you have to add articles like *a* and *the* and prepositions such as *of*, *by*, and *in*.

A **revision** of the program **WILL RESULT in** **increases** in our **efficiency in the servicing** of clients.

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

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

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

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

4. Your sentence tells a more coherent story. Nominalizations let you distort the sequence of actions. (The numbers refer to the real sequence of events.)

Decisions<sup>4</sup> in regard to administration<sup>5</sup> of medication despite inability<sup>2</sup> of an irrational patient appearing<sup>1</sup> in a Trauma Center to provide legal consent<sup>3</sup> rest with the attending physician alone.

When you revise those actions into verbs and reorder them, you get a more coherent narrative:

✓ When a patient appears<sup>1</sup> in a Trauma Center and behaves<sup>2</sup> so irrationally that he cannot legally consent<sup>3</sup> to treatment, only the attending physician can decide<sup>4</sup> whether to medicate<sup>5</sup> him.

## A Qualification: Useful Nominalizations

I have so relentlessly urged you to turn nominalizations into verbs that you might think you should never use them. But in fact, you can't write well without them. The trick is to know which nominalizations to keep and which to revise. Keep these:

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

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

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

Those nominalizations link one sentence to another in a cohesive flow, an issue I'll discuss in detail in Lesson 4.

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

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

✓ Her **acknowledgment** of her guilt impressed me.

But then, why not this:

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

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

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

✓ I accepted her **request**.

4. **A nominalization refers to a concept so familiar that readers think of it as a character (more on this in Lesson 2):**

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

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

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

You must develop an eye for distinguishing nominalizations that express a familiar idea from those that you can revise into a verb:

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

✓ We **DEMAND** that the government **REPEAL** the car tax.

Shakespeare's Hamlet had acting style in mind when he told the actors in the play-within-the-play how they should act their parts, but his advice also applies to how we should write our sentences:

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

—*Hamlet*, 3.2