Ten Principles for Writing Clearly

1. Open your sentences with short, concrete subjects that name the characters in your story.
2. Use specific verbs to name their important actions.
3. Get to main verbs quickly:
   - Avoid long introductory phrases and clauses.
   - Avoid interrupting the subject-verb connection.
4. Open your sentences with information familiar to your reader.
5. Push new, complex units of information to the ends of sentences.
6. Begin sentences constituting a passage with consistent subjects/topics.
7. Be concise:
   - Cut meaningless and repeated words with obvious implications.
   - Compress the meaning of a phrase into one or two words.
   - Prefer affirmative sentences to negative ones.
8. Control sprawl:
   - Don't tack more than one subordinate clause onto another.
   - Extend sentences with resumptive, summative, and free modifiers.
   - Extend sentences with coordinate structures, arranging elements from shorter to longer.
9. Use parallel structures to create a sense of balance and elegance.
10. Above all, write to others as you would have others write to you.

STYLE

The Basics of Clarity and Grace

FIFTH EDITION

Joseph M. Williams
The University of Chicago

Revised by

Joseph Bizup
Boston University

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Williams, Joseph M.
Style: the basics of clarity and grace/ Joseph M. Williams, The University of Chicago; Revised by Joseph Bizup, Boston University.—Fifth Edition.
pages cm
ISBN-13: 978-0-321-95330-8
ISBN-10: 0-321-95330-4
1. English language—Rhetoric. 2. English language—Technical English. 3. English language—Business English. 4. English language—Style. 5. Technical writing. 6. Business writing. I. Bizup, Joseph, 1966- II. Title.
PE1421.W5455 2013
808'.042—dc23

2013032543

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1—EBM—17 16 15 14 13

www.pearsonhighered.com

PEARSON

ISBN 10: 0-321-95876-4
ISBN 13: 978-0-321-95876-1

To my mother and father

. . . English style, familiar but not coarse, elegant, but not ostentatious . . .
—SAMUEL JOHNSON

Contents

So use what you find here not as rules to impose on every sentence *as* you draft it, but as principles to help you identify sentences likely to give your readers a problem and then to revise them.

As important as clarity is, though, some occasions call for more:

> Now the trumpet summons us again—not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need—not as a call to battle, though embattled we are—but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, "rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation"—a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.
>
> —John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961

Few of us are called upon to write a presidential address, but even on less lofty occasions, some of us take a private pleasure in writing a shapely sentence, even if no one will notice. If you enjoy not just writing a sentence but crafting it, you will find some ideas in Lesson 10. Writing is more than just adding one sentence after another, no matter how clear, so in Lesson 7, I suggest some ways to organize your sentences into a coherent whole. Writing is also a social act that might or might not serve the best interests of your readers, so in Lesson 11, I address some issues about the ethics of style.

Many years ago, H. L. Mencken wrote this:

> With precious few exceptions, all the books on style in English are by writers quite unable to write. . . . Their central aim, of course, is to reduce the whole thing to a series of simple rules—the overmastering passion of their melancholy order, at all times and everywhere.
>
> —"The Fringes of Lovely Letters"

Mencken was right: no one learns to write well by rule, especially those who cannot see or feel or think. But I know that many do see clearly, feel deeply, and think carefully but still cannot write sentences that make their thoughts, feelings, and visions clear to others. I also know that the more clearly we write, the more clearly we see and feel and think. Rules help no one do that, but some principles can.

Here they are.

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 Express Judgments

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

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

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

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

Telling Stories about Characters and Their Actions

This story has a problem:

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

We prefer 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:

- 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 (underlined) are *not* the main characters (italicized):

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

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

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

The whole subject of *occurred* does have a character in it: *the **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 (underlined):

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

Principle of Clarity 2: Make Important Actions Verbs

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

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

Fairy Tales and Academic or Professional 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:

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

Notice how long and complex the whole subject of (3a) is 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: the characters (italicized) are subjects (underlined), and the actions (boldfaced) are verbs (capitalized):

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

Note as well that 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 UN **actions** in **targeting** funds to areas most in **need** of **assistance**.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She flies → her flying We sang → our singing

Some nominalizations and verbs are identical:

hope → hope result → result repair → repair

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

Our **request** IS that you CONDUCT a **review** of the data.

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

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

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

subject	verb	object
We	discussed	the problem.
doer	action	

But it is not true for this almost synonymous sentence:

subject	verb		
The problem	was	the topic	of our discussion.
			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 you match characters to subjects and actions to verbs in most of your sentences, readers are likely to think your prose is clear, direct, and readable.

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 (boldfaced).

     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 the 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,* or *has*:**

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

   a. Change the nominalization to a verb:

      intention → intend

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

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

   c. Make that character the subject of the verb:

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

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 the 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.* You don't need them when you use verbs and conjunctions:

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

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

3. The logic of your sentences is clearer. When you nominalize verbs, you 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[4] in regard to administration[5] of medication despite inability[2] of an irrational patient appearing[1] in a trauma center to provide legal consent[3] 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[1] in a trauma center and behaves[2] so irrationally that he cannot legally consent[3] to treatment, only the attending physician can decide[4] whether to medicate[5] 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 that is a short subject that refers to a previous sentence:**

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

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

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

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

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

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

   But then, why not this?

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

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

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

   ✓ I accepted her **request**.

4. **A nominalization that refers to a concept so familiar that your readers will think of it as a character (more on this in the next lesson):**

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

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

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

   You must develop an eye for distinguishing nominalizations expressing familiar ideas from those that you can revise into verbs:

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

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

Lesson

3

Characters

When character is lost, all is lost.
—ANONYMOUS

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHARACTERS

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

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

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

Most readers think (1a) is clearer than (1b), but not much. Now compare (1b) and (1c):

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

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