Understanding Style

Understanding Style

Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style.
—Matthew Arnold

Essentially style resembles good manners. It comes of endeavouring to understand others, of thinking for them rather than yourself—or thinking, that is, with the heart as well as the head.
—Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch

The great enemy of clear language is insincerity.
—George Orwell

First Principles

This text rests on two beliefs: it is good to write clearly, and anyone can. The first is self-evident, especially to those who read a lot of writing like this:

> An understanding of the causal factors involved in excessive drinking by students could lead to their more effective treatment.

But the second may seem optimistic to those who want to write clearly but don't think they can get close to this:

> We could more effectively treat students who drink excessively if we understood why they do so.

This text shows you how.

In it, I consider writing from the perspective of reading. None of us can judge our own writing as others will because when we read it, we respond less to the words on the page or screen than to the thoughts in our minds. We see what we thought we said, and we blame our readers for not understanding us as we understand ourselves. This text presents principles—not rules—that you can follow to escape this trap. Once you understand why readers judge one sentence to be dense and abstract and another to be clear and direct, you can use this understanding to serve your readers better. You can also use it to serve yourself as you read. When you encounter writing you find difficult, you will be able to untangle it so that you can grasp (or at least guess at) its meaning.

The difficult, even daunting, task of writing clearly has challenged generations of writers who have hidden their ideas not only from their readers but sometimes even from themselves. Moreover, unclear writing is not just an inconvenience to readers; it is a social ill. When we read such writing in government regulations, we call it *bureaucratese;* in legal documents, *legalese;* in academic writing that inflates small ideas into gassy abstractions, *academese.* Written carelessly or, worse, deliberately, unclear writing is in its extreme forms a language of exclusion that a democracy cannot tolerate. It is also a problem that has afflicted writing in English for almost five hundred years.

A Short History of Unclear Writing

It wasn't until about the middle of the sixteenth century that writers decided that English was eloquent enough to replace Latin and French in serious discourse. But their first efforts were written in a style so complex that it defeated easy understanding:

> If use and custom, having the help of so long time and continuance wherein to [re]fine our tongue, of so great learning and experience which furnish matter for the [re]fining, of so good wits and judgments which can tell how to refine, have griped at nothing in all that time, with all that cunning, by all those wits which they won't let go but hold for most certain in the right of our writing, that then our tongue has no certainty to trust to, but write all at random.
>
> —Richard Mulcaster, *The First Part of the Elementary*, 1582

In the next century, English became the language of science. We might expect that scientists would want to communicate clearly and simply, but the complex style had spread to their writing as well. As one complained,

> Of all the studies of men, nothing may sooner be obtained than this vicious abundance of phrase, this trick of metaphors, this volubility of tongue which makes so great a noise in the world.
>
> —Thomas Sprat, *History of the Royal Society*, 1667

When this continent was settled, writers might have established a new, democratic prose style for a new, democratic nation. In fact, in 1776, the plain words of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* helped inspire the American Revolution:

> In the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense.

Sad to say, he sparked no such revolution in prose style.

A half century later, James Fenimore Cooper complained about the writing of his day:

> The love of turgid expressions is gaining ground, and ought to be corrected. One of the most certain evidences of a man of high breeding, is his simplicity of speech: a simplicity that is equally removed from vulgarity and exaggeration. . . . Simplicity should be the firm aim, after one is removed from vulgarity. . . . In no case, however, can one who aims at turgid language, exaggerated sentiments, or pedantic utterances, lay claim to be either a man or a woman of the world.
>
> —*The American Democrat,* 1838

Unfortunately, in abusing that style, Cooper adopted it. Had he followed his own advice, he might have written,

> We should discourage those who promote turgid language. A well-bred person speaks simply, in a way that is neither vulgar nor exaggerated. No one can claim to be a man or woman of the world who deliberately exaggerates sentiments or speaks in ways that are turgid or pedantic.

About fifty years later, Mark Twain wrote what we now consider classic American prose. He said this about Cooper's style:

> There have been daring people in the world who claimed that Cooper could write English, but they are all dead now—all dead but Lounsbury [an academic who praised Cooper's style]. . . . [He] says that *Deerslayer* is a "pure work of art." . . . [But] Cooper wrote about the poorest English that exists in our language. . . .
>
> —"Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses"

As much as we admire Twain's directness, few of us emulate it.

In the best-known modern essay on English style, "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell anatomized the turgid language of politicians, bureaucrats, academics, and others:

> The keynote [of a pretentious style] is the elimination of simple verbs. Instead of being a single word, such as *break, stop, spoil, mend, kill*, a verb becomes a phrase, made up of a noun or adjective tacked on to some general-purposes verb such as *prove, serve, form, play, render*. In addition, the passive voice is wherever possible used in preference to the active, and noun constructions are used instead of gerunds (*by examination of* instead of *by examining*).

But as Cooper did, in abusing that style Orwell adopted it. He could have written more concisely:

> Pretentious writers avoid simple verbs. Instead of using one word, such as *break, stop, spoil, mend, kill*, they turn the verb into a noun or adjective, and tack it onto some general-purpose verb such as *prove, serve, form, play, render*. Wherever possible, they use the passive voice instead of the active and noun constructions instead of gerunds (*by examination of* instead of *by examining*).

If the best-known critic of an opaque style could not resist it, we shouldn't be surprised that politicians and academics embrace it. On the language of the social sciences:

> A turgid and polysyllabic prose does seem to prevail in the social sciences. . . . Such lack of ready intelligibility, I believe, usually has little or nothing to do with the complexity of subject matter, and nothing at all to do with profundity of thoughts. It has to do almost entirely with certain confusions of the academic writer about his own status.
>
> —C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*

On the language of medicine:

> It now appears that obligatory obfuscation is a firm tradition within the medical profession. . . . This may explain why only the most eminent physicians, the Cushings and Oslers, feel free to express themselves lucidly.
>
> —Michael Crichton, "Medical Obfuscation: Structure and Function," *New England Journal of Medicine*

On the language of law:

> But now, in law journals, in speeches, in classrooms and in courtrooms, lawyers and judges are beginning to worry about how often they have been misunderstood, and they are discovering that sometimes they cannot even understand each other.
>
> —Tom Goldstein, *New York Times*

On the language of science:

> But there are times when the more the authors explain [about ape communication], the less we understand. Apes certainly seem capable of using language to communicate. Whether scientists are remains doubtful.
>
> —Douglas Chadwick, *New York Times*

Most of us first confront that kind of writing in text sentences like this one:

> Recognition of the fact that systems [of grammar] differ from one language to another can serve as the basis for serious consideration of the problems confronting translators of the great works of world literature originally written in a language other than English.

In about half as many words, that means:

> When we recognize that languages have different grammars, we can consider the problems of those who translate great works of literature into English.

Generations of students have struggled with dense writing, many thinking they weren't smart enough to grasp a writer's deep ideas. Some have been right about that, but more could have blamed the writer's inability (or refusal) to write clearly. Many students, sad to say, give up. Sadder still, others learn not only to read that style but to write it, inflicting it in turn on their readers and thereby sustaining a 450-year-old tradition of unreadable writing.

Some Private Causes Of Unclear Writing

Unclear writing is a social problem, but it often has private causes. Michael Crichton mentioned one: some writers plump up their prose, hoping that complicated sentences indicate deep thought. And when we want to hide the fact that we don't know what we're talking about, we typically throw up a tangle of abstract words in long, complex sentences.

Others write graceless prose not deliberately but because they are seized by the idea that good writing must be free of the kind of errors that only a grammarian can explain. They approach a blank page not as a space to explore ideas, but as a minefield of potential errors. They creep from word to word, concerned less with their readers' understanding than with their own survival.

Others write unclearly because they freeze up, especially when they are learning to think and write in a new academic or

professional setting. As we struggle to master new ideas, most of us write worse than we do when we write about things we understand better. If that sounds like you, take heart: you will write more clearly when you more clearly understand what you are writing about.

But the biggest reason most of us write unclearly is that we don't know when readers will think we are unclear, much less why. Our own writing always seems clearer to us than to our readers because we read into it what we want them to get out of it. And so instead of revising our writing to meet their needs, we send it off the moment it meets ours.

In all of this, of course, is a great irony: we are likely to confuse others when we write about a subject that confuses us. But when we become confused by a complex style, we too easily assume that its complexity signals deep thought, and so we try to imitate it, making our already confused writing even worse.

On Drafting and Revising

A warning: if you think about the principles presented in this text *as you draft,* you may never finish drafting. Most experienced writers like to get something down on paper or up on the screen as fast as they can. Then as they revise that first draft into something clearer, they understand their ideas better. And when they understand their ideas better, they express them more clearly, and the more clearly they express them, the better they understand them … and so it goes, ending only when they run out of energy, interest, or time.

For a fortunate few, that end comes weeks, months, even years after they begin. For most of us, though, the deadline is closer to tomorrow morning. And so we have to settle for prose that is less than perfect but as good as we can make it in the time we have. (Perfection may be the ideal, but it is the death of done.)

So when you draft, concentrate first on getting your ideas into words. Then use the principles here both to help you refine your ideas and to identify and quickly revise sentences and passages likely to give your readers a problem.

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.

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. The subject, indeed, seems to exercise a special and dreadful fascination over school ma'ams, bucolic college professors, and other such pseudoliterates. . . . 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 who do see clearly, feel deeply, and think carefully 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.

Acknowledgments

Credits are listed in order of appearance.

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Correctness

God does not much mind bad grammar, but He does not take any particular pleasure in it.
—Erasmus

Established custom, in speaking and writing, is the standard to which we must at last resort for determining every controverted point in language and style.
—Hugh Blair

English usage is sometimes more than mere taste, judgment, and education—sometimes it's sheer luck, like getting across the street.
—E. B. White

Understanding Correctness

To careful writers, nothing is more important than choice, for choice is what allows them to express themselves clearly and precisely. Which of these sentences would you choose to give to your readers?

1. Lack of media support was the cause of our election loss.
2. We lost the election because the media did not support us.

Most of us would choose (2).

Correctness, though, seems a matter not of choice but of obedience. That does seem to simplify things: "correctness" requires not sound judgment but only a good memory. Some teachers and editors, in fact, think we can stay safe by memorizing and following dozens of alleged "rules" of correct grammar and usage: the truth, however, is more complicated. Some rules are real—if we ignore them, we risk being labeled at least unschooled: VERBS must agree with their SUBJECTS. (Words set in small capitals are defined in the glossary.) There are numerous others. But many often-repeated rules are less important than many think, and some are not even real:

- Never begin a sentence with *and* or *but*.
- Never use double negatives.
- Never split INFINITIVES.

If you obsess over them all, you prevent yourself from writing quickly and clearly. That's why I address correctness now, before clarity, because I want to put it where it belongs—behind us.

The Social Authority of Grammar Rules

Opinion is split on the social role of grammar rules. To some, they are just another device that the Ins use to control the Outs by stigmatizing their language and thereby suppressing their social and political aspirations. To others, the rules of Standard English have been so refined by generations of educated speakers and writers that they must be observed by all the best writers of English.

Both views are correct, partly. For centuries, those governing our affairs have used grammatical "errors" to screen out those unwilling or unable to acquire the habits of the schooled middle class. But the critics are wrong to claim that those rules were *devised* for that end. Standard forms of a language originate in accidents of geography and economic power. When a language has different regional dialects, that of the most powerful speakers usually becomes the most prestigious and the basis for a nation's "correct" writing.

Thus if Edinburgh rather than London had become the center of Britain's economic, political, and literary life, we would speak and write less like Shakespeare and more like the Scottish poet Robert Burns:

A ye wha are sae guid yourself	(All you who are so good yourselves
Sae pious and sae holy,	So pious and so holy,

Ye've nought to do but mark and tell Your neebours' fauts and folly!	You've nothing to do but talk about Your neighbors' faults and folly!)

Conservatives, on the other hand, are right that many rules of Standard English originated in efficient expression. For example, we no longer use all the endings that our verbs required a thousand years ago. We now omit present tense inflections in all but one context (and we don't need it there):

	1ST PERSON	2ND PERSON	3RD PERSON
Singular	I know + ø.	You know + ø.	She know + **S**.
Plural	We know + ø.	You know + ø.	They know + ø.

But those conservatives are wrong when they claim that Standard English has been refined by the logic of educated speakers and writers and, therefore, must be socially and morally superior to the debased language of their alleged inferiors.

Here's the point: Those determined to discriminate will seize on any difference. But our language seems to reflect the quality of our minds more directly than do our ZIP codes, so it's easy for those inclined to look down on others to think that grammatical "errors" indicate mental or moral deficiency. That belief is not just factually wrong; in a democracy, it is also socially destructive. Yet even if *ain't* is logically correct, so great is the power of social convention that we avoid it, at least if we hope to be taken seriously when we write for serious purposes.

Three Kinds of Rules

These corrosive social attitudes about correctness have been encouraged by generations of grammarians who, in their zeal to codify "good" English, have confused three kinds of "rules."

1. Real Rules

Real rules define what makes English English: ARTICLES must precede NOUNS: *the book,* not *book the*. Speakers born into English

don't think about these rules at all when they write, and they violate them only when tired or distracted.

2. Social Rules

Social rules distinguish Standard English from nonstandard: *He doesn't have any money* versus *He don't have no money*. Schooled writers observe these rules as naturally as they observe the Real Rules and think about them only when they notice others violating them. The only writers who *self-consciously* try to follow them are those not born into Standard English who are striving to associate themselves with the English-speaking educated classes.

3. Invented Rules

Finally, some grammarians have invented a handful of rules that they think we all *should* observe. These are the rules that the grammar police love to enforce and that too many educated writers obsess over. Most date from the last half of the eighteenth century:

> Don't split infinitives, as in *to* ***quietly*** *leave*.
>
> Don't end a sentence with a PREPOSITION.

A few date from the twentieth century:

> Don't use *hopefully* for *I hope*, as in ***Hopefully****, it won't rain*.
>
> Don't use *which* for *that*, as in *a car* ***which*** *I sold*.

For almost 300 years, grammarians have accused the best writers of violating rules like these, and the best writers have consistently ignored them. Which is lucky for the grammarians, because if writers did obey all the rules, grammarians would have to keep inventing new ones, or find another line of work. The fact is, none of these invented rules reflects the unself-conscious usage of our best writers. In this lesson, we focus on this third kind of rule, the handful of invented ones, because only they vex those who already write Standard English.

Observing Rules Thoughtfully

It is no simple matter to deal with these invented rules if you want to be thought of as someone who writes "correctly." You could choose the worst-case policy: follow all the rules all the time because sometime, someone will criticize you for something—for beginning a sentence with *and* or ending it with *up*. But if you try

to obey all the rules all the time, you risk becoming so obsessed with rules that you tie yourself in knots. And sooner or later, you will impose those rules—real or not—on others.

The alternative to blind obedience is selective observance. But then you have to decide which rules to observe and which to ignore. And if you ignore an alleged rule, you may have to deal with someone whose passion for "good" grammar makes her see in your split infinitive a sign of intellectual flabbiness, moral corruption, and social decay.

If you want to avoid being accused of "lacking standards" but refuse to submit to whatever "rule" someone can dredge up from ninth-grade English, you have to know more about these invented rules than the rule-mongers do. The rest of this lesson helps you do just that.

Two Kinds of Invented Rules

We can sort most invented rules into two groups: Folklore and Elegant Options.

Folklore

These rules include those that most careful readers and writers ignore. You may not yet have had some of them inflicted on you, but chances are that you will. In what follows, the quotations that illustrate "violations" of these rules are from writers of considerable intellectual and scholarly stature or who, on matters of usage, are reliable conservatives (some are both). A check mark indicates acceptable Standard English, despite what some grammarians claim.

1. **"Don't begin sentences with *and* or *but*."** This passage ignores the "rule" twice:

   ✓ **But,** it will be asked, is tact not an individual gift, therefore highly variable in its choices? **And** if that is so, what guidance can a manual offer, other than that of its author's prejudices—mere impressionism?

   —Wilson Follett, *Modern American Usage: A Guide*, edited and completed by Jacques Barzun et al.

   Some inexperienced writers do begin too many sentences with *and,* but that is an error not in grammar but of style.

Some insecure writers also think they should not begin a sentence with *because*. Allegedly not this:

✓ **Because** we have access to so much historical fact, today we know a good deal about changes within the humanities which were not apparent to those of any age much before our own and which the individual scholar must constantly reflect on.

—Walter Ong, S. J., "The Expanding Humanities and the Individual Scholar," *Publication of the Modern Language Association*

This folklore about *because* appears in no handbook I know of, but it is gaining currency. It probably stems from advice aimed at avoiding sentence FRAGMENTS like this one:

The plan was rejected. **Because** it was incomplete.

QUICK TIP At best, this rule reflects a small truth of style. Readers prefer sentences to begin with information they know and to proceed to information they don't. But SUBORDINATE CLAUSES beginning with *because* usually convey new information, and so putting one at the beginning of a sentence can be mildly awkward. To begin a sentence with a CLAUSE expressing familiar information about causation, use *since* rather than *because*, because *since* implies that the reader already knows what's in the clause:

✓ Since our language seems to reflect our quality of mind, it is easy for those inclined to look down on others to think that grammatical "errors" indicate mental or moral deficiency.

There are exceptions to this principle, but it's generally sound.

2. **"Use the RELATIVE PRONOUN *that*—not *which*—for RESTRICTIVE CLAUSES."** Allegedly not this:

✓ Next is a typical situation **which** a practiced writer corrects "for style" virtually by reflex action.

—Jacques Barzun, *Simple and Direct*

Yet just a few sentences before, Barzun himself (one of our most eminent intellectual historians and critics of style) had asserted:

Us[e] *that* with defining [i.e., restrictive] clauses except when stylistic reasons interpose.

(In the sentence quoted above, no such reasons interpose.)

This "rule" is relatively new. It first appeared in 1906 in Henry and Francis Fowler's *The King's English*. The Fowlers thought that the random variation between *that* and *which* to begin a restrictive clause was messy, so they just asserted that henceforth writers should (with some exceptions) limit *which* to NONRESTRICTIVE CLAUSES.

A nonrestrictive clause modifies a noun naming a referent that you can identify unambiguously without the information in that clause. For example:

✓ ABCO Inc. ended its first bankruptcy, **which** it had filed in 2012.

A company can have only one first bankruptcy, so we can unambiguously identify the bankruptcy without the information in the following clause. We therefore call that clause *nonrestrictive*, because it does not further "restrict" or identify what the noun names. In that context, we put a comma before the modifying clause and begin it with *which*. This rule is based on historical and contemporary usage.

But the Fowlers sought to limit *which* to nonrestrictive clauses only. For restrictive clauses, they prescribed *that*. For example:

✓ ABCO Inc. sold a product **that** [*not* **which**] made millions.

Since ABCO presumably makes many products, the clause *that made millions* "restricts" the product to the one that made millions, and so, according to the Fowlers, it should begin with *that*. (For another allegedly incorrect *which*, see the passage by Walter Ong on p. 14.)

Francis died in 1918, but Henry continued the family tradition with his 1926 *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. In that landmark work, he discussed the finer points of *which* and *that*, and then made this wistful observation:

> Some there are who follow this principle now; but it would be idle to pretend that it is the practice either of most or of the best writers.

I confess I follow the Fowlers' advice, not because a restrictive *which* is an error, but because *that* has a softer sound. I do sometimes choose a *which* when it's within a word or two of a *that,* because I don't like the sound of two *that*s close together:

✓ We all have **that** one rule **that** we will not give up.

✓ We all have **that** one rule **which** we will not give up.

3. "**Use *fewer* with nouns you count, *less* with nouns you cannot."** Allegedly not this:

   ✓ I can remember no **less** than five occasions when the correspondence columns of *The Times* rocked with volleys of letters. . . .

   —Noel Gilroy Annan, Lord Annan, "The Life of the Mind in British Universities Today," *American Council of Learned Societies Newsletter*

   No one uses *fewer* with mass nouns (*fewer dirt*) but educated writers often use *less* with countable plural nouns (*less resources*).

4. **"Use *since* and *while* to refer only to time, not to mean *because* or *although*."** Most careful writers use *since* with a meaning close to *because* but, as mentioned above, with an added sense of "What follows I assume you already know":

   ✓ **Since** asbestos is dangerous, it should be removed carefully.

   Nor do most careful writers restrict *while* to its temporal sense (*We'll wait while you eat*). They use it also with a meaning close to "I assume you know what I state in this clause, but what I assert in the next will qualify it":

   ✓ **While** we agree on a date, we disagree about the place.

Here's the point: If writers whom we judge to be competent regularly violate some alleged rule and most careful readers never notice, then the rule has no force. In those cases, it is not writers who should change their usage, but grammarians who should change their rules.

Elegant Options

These next "rules" complement the Real Rules. Most readers do not notice when you observe these Real Rules, but does when you violates them (like that). On the other hand, few readers notice when you violate these elegant options, but some do when you observe them, because doing so makes your writing seem just a bit more self-consciously formal.

1. **"Don't split infinitives."** Purists condemn Dwight Macdonald, himself a linguistic archconservative, for this sentence (my emphasis in all the examples that follow):

✓ One wonders why Dr. Gove and his editors did not think of labeling *knowed* as substandard right where it occurs, and one suspects that they wanted **to slightly conceal** the fact. . . .

—"The String Untuned," *The New Yorker*

They would require

they wanted **to conceal slightly** the fact. . . .

Infinitives are split so often that when you avoid splitting one, careful readers may think you are trying to be especially correct, whether you are or not.

2. **"Use *whom* as the OBJECT of a verb or preposition."** Purists would condemn William Zinsser for this use of *who*:

✓ Soon after you confront this matter of preserving your identity, another question will occur to you: "**Who** am I writing for?"

—*On Writing Well*

They would insist on

another question will occur to you: "For **whom** am I writing?"

Here is an actual rule: use *who* when it is the subject of a verb in its own clause; use *whom* only when it is an object in its own clause.

3. **"Don't end a sentence with a preposition."** Purists condemn Sir Ernest Gowers, editor of the second edition of Fowler's *Dictionary*, for this:

✓ The peculiarities of legal English are often used as a stick to beat the official **with.**

—*The Complete Plain Words*

They insist on this:

. . . a stick **with which** to beat the official.

The first is correct; the second is more formal. (Again, see the Ong passage on p. 14.) And when you choose to shift both the preposition and its *whom* to the left, your sentence seems more formal yet. Compare:

✓ The man I met **with** was the man I had written **to.**

✓ The man **with whom** I met was the man **to whom** I had written.

A preposition can, however, end a sentence weakly. George Orwell may have chosen to end this next sentence with

from to make a sly point about English grammar, but I suspect it just ended up there (and note the "incorrect" *which*):

> [The defense of the English language] has nothing to do with . . . the setting up of a "standard English" **which** must never be departed **from.**
>
> —"Politics and the English Language"

This would have been less awkward and more emphatic:

> We do not defend English just to create a "standard English" whose rules we must always obey.

4. **"Use the singular with *none* and *any*."** *None* and *any* were originally singular, but today most writers use them as plural, so if you use them as singular, some readers will notice. The second sentence is a bit more formal than the first:

   ✓ **None** of the reasons **are** sufficient to end the project.

   ✓ **None** of the reasons **is** sufficient to end the project.

   When you are under close scrutiny, you might choose to observe all these optional rules. Ordinarily, though, most careful writers ignore them, which is to say they are not rules at all but rather stylistic choices that create a formal tone. If you adopt the worst-case approach and observe them all, all the time, few readers will give you credit but many will notice how formal you seem.

Hobgoblins

For some unknown reason, a handful of items have become the object of particularly zealous abuse. There's no explaining why; none of them interferes with clarity or concision.

1. **"Never use *like* for *as* or *as if*."** Allegedly, not this:

   ✓ These operations failed **like** the earlier ones did.

   But this:

   ✓ These operations failed **as** the earlier ones did.

   Like became a SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTION in the eighteenth century when writers began to drop *as* from the conjunctive PHRASE *like as,* leaving just *like* as the CONJUNCTION.

This process is called *elision*, and it is a common linguistic change. It is telling that when editing the second edition of Fowler's *Dictionary* (the one favored by conservatives), Gowers deleted *like* for *as* from Fowler's list of "Illiteracies" and moved it into the category of "Sturdy Indefensibles."

2. "**Don't use *hopefully* to mean 'I hope.'"** Allegedly, not this:

   ✓ Hopefully, it will not rain.

   But this:

   ✓ I hope that it will not rain.

   This "rule" dates from the middle of the twentieth century. It has no basis in logic or grammar, as the allegedly incorrect use of *hopefully* parallels the usage of other words that no one complains about, words such as *candidly, frankly, sadly*, and *happily*:

   ✓ Candidly, we may fail. (That is, *I am candid when I say we may fail*.)

   ✓ Sadly, we must go. (That is, *I am sad when I say we must go*.)

3. **"Don't use *finalize* to mean 'finish' or 'complete.'"** But *finalize* doesn't mean just "finish." It means "to clean up the last few details," a sense captured by no other word.
4. **"Don't use *impact* as a verb but only as a noun."** Some would object to this:

   ✓ The survey impacted our strategy.

   And insist on this:

   ✓ The survey had an impact on our strategy.

   Impact has been a verb for 400 years, but on some people, historical evidence has none.
5. **"Don't modify absolute words such as *perfect, unique, final,* or *complete* with *very, more, quite,* and so on."** That rule would have deprived us of this familiar sentence:

   ✓ We the People of the United States, in order to form a **more perfect** union. . . .

   (Even so, this is a rule generally worth following.)
6. **"Never ever use *irregardless* for *regardless* or *irrespective*."** However arbitrary this rule is, follow it. Use *irregardless* and some will judge you irredeemable.

Some Words that Attract Special Attention

Some words are so often confused with others that careful readers are likely to note when you correctly distinguish them. Here are some:

aggravate means "to make worse." Fastidious readers may object if you use it to mean "annoy."

anticipate means "to prepare for a contingency." It does not mean just "expect." You anticipate a question when you prepare its answer before it's asked; if you know it's coming but don't prepare, you only expect it.

anxious means "uneasy" not "eager." You're eager to leave if you're happy to go. You're anxious about leaving if it makes you nervous.

blackmail means "to extort by threatening to reveal damaging information." It does not mean simply "coerce." One country cannot blackmail another with nuclear weapons when it only threatens to use them.

cohort means "a group who attends on someone." It does not mean a single accompanying person. When Prince William married Kate Middleton, she became his consort; his hangers-on are still his cohort.

comprise means "to include all parts in a single unit." It is not synonymous with *compose* or *constitute*. The alphabet is not comprised by its letters; it comprises them. Letters constitute the alphabet, which is thus constituted by them.

continuous means "without interruption." It is not synonymous with *continual,* which means an activity continued through time, with interruptions. If you continuously interrupt someone, that person will never say a word because your interruption will never stop. If you continually interrupt, you let the other person finish a sentence from time to time.

disinterested means "neutral." It does not mean "uninterested." A judge should be disinterested in the outcome of a case but not uninterested in it. (Incidentally, the original meaning of *disinterested* was "to be uninterested.")

enormity means "hugely bad." It does not mean "enormous." In private, a belch might be enormous, but at a state funeral, it would also be an enormity.

flaunt means "to display conspicuously." It is not synonymous with *flout*, which means "to scorn a rule or standard." If you choose to scorn this distinction, you would not flout your flaunting it but flaunt your flouting it.

fortuitous means "by chance." It does not mean "fortunate." You are fortunate when you fortuitously pick the right number in the lottery.

fulsome means "sickeningly excessive." It does not mean just "much." We all enjoy praise, except when it becomes fulsome.

notorious means "known for bad behavior." It does not mean "famous." Frank Sinatra was a famous singer but a notorious bully.

simplistic does not mean merely "simple." It means "overly simple" and is usually used in a pejorative sense. A simple solution to a problem is often best; a simplistic solution never is.

These days, many readers won't care about these distinctions, but some will. And they may be just those whose judgment carries weight when it matters most.

On the other hand, as an educated writer, you are expected to correctly distinguish *imply* and *infer, principal* and *principle, accept* and *except, capital* and *capitol, affect* and *effect, proceed* and *precede, discrete* and *discreet*. Most careful readers also notice when a Latinate or Greek plural noun is used as a singular, so you might want to keep these straight, too:

Singular	datum	criterion	medium	stratum	phenomenon
Plural	data	criteria	media	strata	phenomena

Here's the point: You can't predict good grammar or correct usage by logic or general rule. You have to learn the rules one-by-one and accept the fact that many of them are arbitrary and idiosyncratic.

Pronouns and Gender-Neutral Language

Pronouns and Their Referents

Just as we expect verbs to agree with their subjects, so we expect pronouns to agree with their antecedents. Not this:

> Early **efforts** to oppose surveillance of ordinary citizens failed because **it** ignored political issues. **No one** wanted to expose **themselves** to the charge of being unpatriotic.

But this:

✓ Early **efforts** to oppose surveillance of ordinary citizens failed because **they** ignored political issues. **No one** wanted to expose **himself** to the charge of being unpatriotic.

But making pronouns agree with their referents, you might have noticed, raises two problems.

First, do we use a singular or plural pronoun when referring to a noun that is singular in grammar but plural in meaning? Some writers use a singular verb and pronoun when the group acts as a single entity:

✓ The **committee** HAS met but has not yet made **its** decision.

But they use a plural verb and pronoun when its members act individually:

✓ The **faculty** HAVE the memo, but not all of **them** have read it.

These days plurals are irregularly used in both senses (but the plural is the rule in British English).

Second, what pronoun do we use to refer to singular common nouns that signal no gender, such as *teacher, doctor*, or *student*, or to pronouns that are singular in form but indeterminate or plural in meaning, such as *someone, anyone*, or *everyone?* We casually use *they:*

> Every **student** knows that to get good grades, **they** must take **their** classes seriously. If **someone** won't do **their** work, it is very hard for **them** to succeed.

In formal writing, though, most careful writers and readers still want a singular pronoun. The convention was once that a feminine third-person singular pronoun (*she, her, hers*) could be used only when its referent was unambiguously female and that the masculine pronoun (*he, him, his*) should be used in all other cases. But that rule leads to sentences that today seem socially and stylistically awkward:

> Every **student** knows that to get good grades, **he** must take **his** classes seriously. If **someone** won't do **his** work, it is very hard for **him** to succeed.

If, however, we reject the singular *they* because some (including me) consider it improper in formal writing, and we likewise reject *he* because some (also including me) regard it as biased, we are then confronted with a tricky problem of style. The thing to remember is that we have choices.

Gender-Neutral Options

We wouldn't have to face such conundrums if, like many other languages, English had a gender-neutral third-person singular pronoun. Luckily, English offers good options to careful writers who want to write in a gender-neutral fashion. Here are four, in detail.

1. **Replace the gendered pronoun with another pronoun or with a noun.** In English, only third-person singular pronouns are explicitly gendered, and you can often simply replace them.

   Use both the masculine and feminine pronouns: You can replace a masculine pronoun with the masculine and feminine pronouns together.

   A careful **writer** will always consider the needs of **his** readers.

   ✓ A careful **writer** will always consider the needs of **his or her** readers.

   But this solution is not entirely inclusive, as some people identify as neither male nor female. And it can be cumbersome if a sentence contains several pronouns.

   Substitute plurals for singulars: In English, plural pronouns are gender neutral and can refer to categories or classes.

   A **writer** should use gender-neutral language if **he** wants **his** readers to see **him** as modern and progressive.

   ✓ **Writers** should use gender-neutral language if **they** want **their** readers to see **them** as modern and progressive.

   But since we usually expect abstractions to be singular, using the plural can sometimes change the meaning.

   Substitute the first-person plural pronoun: In English, first-person pronouns are gender-neutral, and we can use them in their plural form generically.

   A **writer** should use gender-neutral language if **he** wants **his** readers to see **him** as modern and progressive.

   ✓ **We** should use gender-neutral language in **our** writing if **we** want **our** readers to see **us** as modern and progressive.

   But *we* can be ambiguous, and in some contexts, it can sound too formal.

   Substitute the indefinite pronoun "one": This pronoun is also gender neutral, so one may use it as well.

   A **writer** should use gender-neutral language if **he** wants to seem modern and progressive.

   ✓ **One** should use gender-neutral language if **one** wants to seem modern and progressive.

   But even more than *we*, *one* can sound stiff.

Repeat the noun: In English, nouns aren't gendered, so you can avoid pronouns by repeating those nouns.

If a **writer** wants to seem modern and progressive, **he** should use gender-neutral language.

✓ If a **writer** wants to seem modern and progressive, **the writer** should use gender-neutral language.

But repeating a noun, especially more than once, can sound stiff.

2. **Cut a gendered pronoun when that doesn't change the meaning.** You can sometimes replace a pronoun with another kind of word or cut it altogether.

Replace a possessive pronoun with an article or other determiner: If you want to use a singular count noun, you can replace a possessive pronoun with another DETERMINER (italicized) such as an article or quantifier.

A **writer** can impress *his* **reader** by using gender-neutral language.

✓ A **writer** can impress *a* **reader** by using gender-neutral language.

✓ A **writer** can impress *each* **reader** by using gender-neutral language.

Cut the pronoun: If you use a plural noun, you can sometimes simply cut a redundant POSSESSIVE.

✓ A **writer** can impress **readers** by using gender-neutral language.

But not all possessives are redundant. Compare these:

A passionate **writer** treasures **his books**.

✓ A passionate **writer** treasures **books**.

3. ***Avoid a gendered pronoun by choosing a different grammatical construction.*** If you can't replace or cut a gendered pronoun, you will have to make a more ambitious revision. In particular, look for opportunities to eliminate a gendered pronoun that is the subject of a subordinate or MAIN CLAUSE, as in these next sentences (pronouns and referents boldfaced, subordinate clauses italicized):

A **writer** should use gender-neutral language *if* ***he*** *wants to seem modern and progressive*.

If a ***writer*** *wants to seem modern and progressive*, **he** should use gender-neutral language.

But be careful with these next options, because when you eliminate subjects of sentences and clauses, you risk cutting "doers" or characters and making your writing unclear.

Rephrase using a relative clause: You can replace a subordinate clause with a RELATIVE CLAUSE (underlined) introduced by *who, whom*, or *whose*.

✓ A **writer** **who** wants to seem modern and progressive should use gender-neutral language.

Rephrase using a gerund or nominalization: You can use a GERUND (a word of the form verb+*ing* that acts as a noun) or NOMINALIZATION (a verb turned into a noun) to avoid repeating a "doer" or to cut it entirely (main subject underlined, gerund and nominalization italicized).

✓ *Using* gender-neutral language makes a **writer** seem modern and progressive.

✓ The *use* of gender-neutral language makes a **writer** seem modern and progressive.

Rephrase using the passive voice: You can also switch from the ACTIVE to the PASSIVE voice (passive verb capitalized).

✓ Gender-neutral language should BE USED if a **writer** wants to seem modern and progressive.

Rephrase using an infinitive phrase: You can use an infinitive phrase (underlined).

✓ To seem modern and progressive, a **writer** should use gender-neutral language.

But watch out for DANGLING MODIFIERS (see p. 155). In that last sentence, the modifier doesn't dangle, because the infinitive phrase modifies *writer*, the subject of the main clause. In this one, it does:

> To seem modern and progressive, gender-neutral language should be used.

It is the *writer* (not *gender-neutral language*) who wants to seem modern and progressive.

4. **Alternate between masculine and feminine pronouns.** Finally, you can alternate between *he* and *she*, as I have in this lesson. Some readers find this solution stylistically intrusive, but it is an option that is becoming increasingly popular.

The Future

Some argue that we should tackle the problem head-on and just invent an inclusive third-person singular pronoun. Such attempts at linguistic engineering, however, are rarely successful, especially when they concern the basic structures of a language.

But if engineering won't work, evolution eventually will. The one constant with language is that it changes to meet its users' needs, and I suspect that in time we will come to accept *they* as an inclusive third-person singular pronoun. The fact is, eminent writers have used *they* in this way since at least the fourteenth century. But whatever the past and whatever the future, we have choices now, and that's what matters most.

Summing Up

We must write correctly, but if in defining correctness we ignore the difference between fact and folklore, we risk overlooking what is really important—the choices that make our writing dense and wordy or clear and concise. We are not precise merely because we get right *which* and *that* and avoid *finalize* and *hopefully*. Many who obsess over such details are oblivious to this more serious kind of problem:

> Too precise a specification of information processing requirements incurs the risk of overestimation resulting in unused capacity or inefficient use of costly resources or of underestimation leading to ineffectiveness or other inefficiencies.

That means:

- ✓ When you specify too precisely the resources you need to process information, you may overestimate. If you do, you risk having more capacity than you need or using costly resources inefficiently.

Both sentences are grammatically correct, but who would choose the first over the second?

I suspect that those who observe all the rules all the time do so not because they want to protect the integrity of the language but because they want to assert a style of their own. Some of us are straightforward and plain speaking; others take pleasure in a bit of formality, in a touch of fastidiously self-conscious "class." We should not scorn this impulse, so long as it is not a pretext for social discrimination and so long as it remains subordinated to the more important matters to which we now turn: the choices that define not "good grammar" but clarity and grace.

Acknowledgments

Credits are listed in order of appearance.

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Glossary

Article: They are easier to list than to define: *a, an, and the*. An article is one kind of DETERMINER.

Clause: A clause has two defining characteristics:

1. It has at least one subject and a verb.
2. The verb must agree with the subject in number and can be made past or present.

By this definition, these are clauses:

She left that they leave if she left why he is leaving

These next are not, because the verbs cannot be made past tense nor do they agree in number with the putative subject:

for them to **go** her **having gone**

Conjunction: Usually defined as a word that links words, PHRASES, or CLAUSES. They are easier to illustrate than define (the first two are also categorized as SUBORDINATING conjunctions):

adverbial conjunctions	because, although, when, since
relative conjunctions	who, whom, whose, which, that
sentence conjunctions	thus, however, therefore, nevertheless
coordinating conjunctions	and, but, yet, for, so, or, nor
correlative conjunctions	both X and Y, not only X but Y, (n)either X (n)or Y, X as well as Y

Determiner: A word that precedes and comments on a noun but is not an ADJECTIVE: *the, this, some, first, one, once,* etc.

Fragment: A PHRASE or DEPENDENT CLAUSE that begins with a capital letter and ends with a period, question mark, or exclamation mark:

Because I left. Though I am here! What you did?

These are complete sentences:

He left because I did.	Though I am here, she is not!	I know what we did.

Gerund: A NOMINALIZATION created by adding *-ing* to a VERB:

When she **left** we were happy. → Her **leaving** made us happy.

Infinitive: A VERB that cannot be made past or present. It often is preceded by the word to: *He decided to* ***stay*****.** But sometimes not: *We helped him* ***repair*** *the door.*

Main Clause: A main or independent clause has at least a SUBJECT and VERB (imperatives are the exception) and can be punctuated as an independent sentence:

I left. Why did you leave? We are leaving.

A SUBORDINATE or DEPENDENT CLAUSE cannot be punctuated as an independent sentence. These are incorrectly punctuated:

Because she left. That they left. Whom you spoke to.

Noun: A word that fits this frame: *The* [ ] *is good*. Some are concrete: *dog, rock, car;* others are abstract: *ambition, space, speed.*

The nouns that most concern us are NOMINALIZATIONS, nouns derived from VERBS or ADJECTIVES: *act → action*, *wide → width.*

Object: There are three kinds:

1. DIRECT object: the NOUN following a TRANSITIVE VERB:

   I *read* the **book.** We *followed* the **car.**

2. PREPOSITIONAL object: the noun following a preposition:

   in the **house** *by* the **walk** *with* **fervor**

3. INDIRECT object: the noun between a VERB and its direct object:

   I *gave* **him** a tip.

Phrase: A group of words constituting a unit but not including a SUBJECT and a FINITE VERB: *the dog, too old, was leaving, in the house, ready to work.*

Possessive: *my, your, his, her, its, their* or a NOUN ending with *-'s* or *-s':* the **dog's** tail.

Preposition: Easier to list than to define: *in, on, up, over, of, at, by,* etc.

Progressive: The PRESENT PARTICIPLE form of the VERB: *Our team is **winning** the game.*

Relative Clause: A clause beginning with a relative pronoun.

Relative Pronoun: *who, whom, which, whose, that* when used in a relative clause.

Subject: The subject is what the VERB agrees with in number:

Two men *are* at the door. **One man** *is* at the door.

Distinguish the WHOLE SUBJECT from its SIMPLE SUBJECT.

Subordinate Clause: A clause that usually begins with a SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTION such as *if, when, unless,* or *which, that, who.* There are three kinds of subordinate clauses: NOUN, ADVERBIAL, and ADJECTIVAL.

Subordinating Conjunction: *because, if, when, since, unless, which, who, that, whose,* etc.

Verb: The word that must agree with the SUBJECT in number and that can be inflected for past or present:

The book **is** ready. The books **were** returned.

Actions

Actions

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action.
—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *HAMLET*, 3.2

I am unlikely to trust a sentence that comes easily.
—WILLIAM GASS

UNDERSTANDING 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) too 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. (To profit from this lesson, you must be able to identify verbs, SIMPLE SUBJECTS, and WHOLE SUBJECTS. See the Glossary.)

Telling Stories: Characters and 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 something 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 the story more clearly than (2a) because it follows two principles:

- The 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 name not characters but 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 possessive noun *Wolf's jump*. But the Wolf is not *the* 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*.

The subjects and the main characters are now the same words:

SUBJECT/CHARACTER	VERB
Little Red Riding Hood	was walking
Wolf	jumped

Principle of Clarity 2: Make Important Actions Verbs

Now look at how the actions and verbs differ in (2a): the characters' actions are expressed not in verbs but in abstract nouns (actions are boldfaced; verbs are 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 the verbs are: *was taking, occurred*. The story isn't about *taking* and *occurring* but about *walking* and *jumping* and *frightening*. In (2b), the clearer sentence, the verbs name these important story 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—walking, jumping, and frightening—are *not* verbs. In (2b), the more direct sentence, those two main characters *are* subjects and their main actions *are* verbs. That's why we prefer (2b).

Fairy Tales and "Serious" Writing

Writing in college or on the job may seem distant from fairy tales like "Little Red Riding Hood." But it's not, because in every kind

of writing, most sentences still tell stories. That is, they 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. Its 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, the important 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 is the whole 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: most of 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 when we make a character the simple subject, the whole subject (*The Federalists*) also becomes short and concrete.

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

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), most of 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, and 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 *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 DO 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 writing that feels dense, 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 name any particular kind of 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.

Exercise 1

If you aren't sure whether you can distinguish verbs, adjectives, and nominalizations, practice on the list below. Turn verbs and adjectives into nominalizations, and nominalizations into adjectives and verbs. Remember that some verbs and nominalizations have the same form:

Heavy rains CAUSE flooding.

Heavy rains ARE a **cause** of flooding.

analysis	believe	attempt	conclusion	evaluate
suggest	approach	comparison	define	discuss
expression	failure	intelligent	thorough	appearance
decrease	improve	increase	accuracy	careful
emphasize	explanation	description	clear	examine

Exercise 2

Identify the subject, character, verb, and action in these pairs of sentences. The unclear sentence is first; the improved sentence follows. What do you notice about how characters and subjects, and actions and verbs, are aligned in each?

1a. There is opposition among many voters to nuclear power plants based on a belief in their threat to human health.

1b. Many voters oppose nuclear power plants because they believe that such plants threaten human health.

2a. Growth in the market for electronic books is driven by the frequent preference among customers for their convenience and portability.

2b. The market for electronic books has grown because customers frequently prefer their convenience and portability.

3a. There is a belief among some researchers that consumers' choices in fast food restaurants are healthier because there are postings of nutrition information in menus.

3b. Some researchers believe that consumers are choosing healthier foods because fast food restaurants are posting nutrition information in their menus.

4a. The design of the new roller coaster was more of a struggle for the engineers than had been their expectation.

4b. The engineers struggled more than they expected when designing the new roller coaster.

5a. Because the student's preparation for the exam was thorough, none of the questions on it were a surprise.

5b. Because the student prepared thoroughly for the exam, she was not surprised by any of the questions on it.

Exercise 3

Create three sentences using verbs and adjectives from Exercise 1. Then rewrite them using the corresponding nominalizations (keep the meaning the same). For example, using *suggest, discuss*, and *careful*, write:

> I SUGGEST that we DISCUSS the issue **CAREFULLY**.

Then rewrite that sentence into its nominalized form:

> My **suggestion** is that our **discussion** of the issue be done with **care**.

Only when you see how a clear sentence can be made unclear will you understand why it seemed clear in the first place.

The Problem of Familiarity

Writers tend to write badly when they are unsure about what they want to say or how to say it. But they also tend to write badly because they are too familiar with their own writing to accurately judge how readers will respond to it.

You've probably had this experience: you think you've written something good, but your reader thinks otherwise. You wonder whether that person is just being difficult, but you bite your tongue and try to fix it, even though you think it should already be clear to anyone who can read Dr. Seuss. When that happens to me (regularly, I might add), I almost always realize—eventually—that my readers are right, that they see where my writing needs work better than I do.

Why are we so often right about the writing of others and so often wrong about our own? It is because we all read into our own writing what we want readers to get out of it. That explains why two readers can disagree about the clarity of the same piece of writing: the reader who is most familiar with its content will likely find it clearest. Both are right, because clarity is not a property of sentences but an impression of readers. It is in the eye of the beholder.

That is why we need to look at our own writing in a way that is almost mechanical, that sidesteps our too-good understanding of it. The quickest way is to follow the procedure below.

How to Revise: Characters and Actions

You can use the two principles of clarity (make main characters subjects; make important actions verbs) to explain why your readers judge your prose as they do. But 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: analyze, assess, rewrite.

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

      The automation of manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes by corporations means the loss of jobs for many blue-collar workers.

   b. Then ask two questions:
      - Did you underline any abstract nouns as simple subjects?

The **automation** of manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes by corporations means the loss of jobs for many blue-collar workers.

- Did you underline seven or eight words before getting to a verb?

  The automation of manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes by corporations (10 words) **means** the loss of jobs for many blue-collar workers.

If you answer *yes* to either, you should probably revise.

2. **Assess**
   a. Decide who or what your main characters are.

      The automation of manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes by **corporations** means the loss of jobs for many **blue-collar workers.**

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

      The **automation** of manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes by corporations means the **loss** of jobs for many blue-collar workers.

3. **Rewrite**
   a. If the actions are nominalizations, make them verbs.

      automation → automate loss → lose

   b. Make the characters the subjects of those verbs.

      corporations automate blue-collar workers lose

   c. Rewrite the sentence with characters as subjects and actions as verbs, using subordinating conjunctions such as *because, if, when, although, why, how, whether*, or *that* to show relationships among ideas.

      ✓ Many blue-collar workers are losing their jobs **because** corporations are automating their manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes.

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 **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 new 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*

Our **loss** in sales	→	*We* **LOST** sales
was the result of	→	because
their **expansion** of outlets	→	*they* **EXPANDED** 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.

QUICK TIP When you revise a complicated sentence, you will have more than one character-action clause. Decide how the clauses fit together, then try out these patterns: *X because Y; Since X, Y; If X, then Y; Although X, Y*; *X and/but/so Y.*

Some Happy Consequences

When you consistently rely on verbs to express important 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 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 precise subordinating conjunctions 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 sentences tell more coherent stories. 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 irrational patients appearing[1] in a Trauma Center to provide legal consent[3] rest with the attending physician alone.

   ✓ When patients appear[1] in a Trauma Center and behave[2] so irrationally that they cannot legally consent[3] to treatment, only the attending physician can decide[4] whether to medicate[5] them.

Exercise 4

One sentence in each of these pairs is clear, expressing characters as subjects and actions as verbs; the other is less clear, with actions in

nominalizations and characters often not in subjects. First, decide which is which. Then underline subjects, bracket verbs, box actions, and circle characters. What do you notice about where these words appear in the sentences?

1a. Some people argue that atmospheric carbon dioxide does not elevate global temperature.

1b. There has been speculation by educators about the role of the family in improving educational achievement.

2a. The store's price increases led to frustration among its customers.

2b. When we write concisely, readers understand easily.

3a. Researchers have identified the AIDS virus but have failed to develop a vaccine to immunize those at risk.

3b. Attempts by economists at defining full employment have been met with failure.

4a. Complaints by editorial writers about voter apathy rarely offer suggestions about dispelling it.

4b. Although critics claim that children who watch a lot of television tend to become less able readers, no one has demonstrated that to be true.

5a. The loss of market share to Japan by domestic automakers resulted in the disappearance of hundreds of thousands of jobs.

5b. When educators embrace new-media technology, our schools will teach complex subjects more effectively.

6a. We need to know which parts of our national forests are being logged most extensively so that we can save virgin stands at greatest risk.

6b. There is a need for an analysis of library use to provide a reliable base for the projection of needed resources.

Exercise 5

Now revise the nominalized sentences in Exercise 4 into sentences in which the actions are verbs. Use its paired verbal version as a model. For example, if the verbal sentence begins with *when*, begin your revision with *when:*

Sentence to revise:	2a. The store's price **increases** led to **frustration** among its customers.
Model:	2b. When we WRITE concisely, readers UNDERSTAND more easily.
Your revision:	2a. When the store INCREASED prices, . . .

Exercise 6

Revise these next sentences so that the nominalizations are verbs and characters are their subjects. In (1) through (4), characters are italicized and nominalizations are boldfaced.

1. *Lincoln's* **hope** was for the **preservation** of the Union without war, but the *South's* **attack** on Fort Sumter made war an **inevitability.**
2. Attempts were made on the part of the *president's aides* to assert *his* **immunity** from a *congressional* subpoena.
3. There were **predictions** by *business executives* that the **economy** would experience a quick **revival.**
4. Your **analysis** of *my* report omits any data in **support** of *your* **criticism** of *my* **findings.**

In sentences 5 through 8, the characters are italicized; find the actions and revise.

5. Attempts at explaining increases in *voter* participation in this year's elections were made by *several candidates*.
6. The agreement by the *class* on the reading list was based on the assumption that there would be tests on only certain selections.
7. There was no independent *business-sector* study of the cause of the sudden increase in the trade surplus.
8. An understanding as to the need for controls over drinking on campus was recognized by *fraternities*.

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 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.

   Those nominalizations link one sentence to another in a cohesive flow.

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

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

   ✓ Her **admission** of 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.**

   Familiar nominalizations such as *request* feel more concrete than abstract ones. But when you can, you should still express actions as verbs:

   Her **request** for **assistance** CAME after the deadline.

   ✓ She **REQUESTED assistance** after the deadline.

4. **A nominalization that refers to a concept so familiar to your readers that to them, it is a virtual character:**

   ✓ 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.**

   Those nominalizations name familiar concepts: *abortion* on *demand, amendment, election, taxation, representation, revolution*. You must develop an eye for distinguishing nominalizations expressing common ideas from those you can revise into verbs:

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

   ✓ We **DEMAND** that Congress **REPEAL** the **inheritance** tax.

Clarity, Not Simplemindedness

Your readers want you to write clearly, even simply—but not simplistically (see p. 21). Some argue that all sentences should be short, no more than fifteen words or so. But many mature ideas cannot be expressed so compactly.

In Your Own Words

Exercise 7

Go through a page of your own writing. Underline whole subjects and bracket verbs. Now, think about the story you are telling. Circle the main characters and box their actions, wherever they appear. Look especially for actions hidden in nominalizations. What do you notice? How clear will a reader likely find your writing? If necessary, revise to align characters with subjects and specific actions with verbs.

Exercise 8

Writers tend to think their writing is clearer than their readers do. Select a page of your writing and share it with a reader. Both of you rate its clarity on a scale of 1–10, with 10 being perfectly clear and 1 being incomprehensible. Use the procedures for analyzing sentences on pages 35–36 to explain any differences in your ratings. Revise your writing if necessary.

Summing Up

The two most general principles for clear sentences are these: make main characters the subjects of your verbs; make those characters' important actions your verbs.

We can represent these principles graphically. Readers must mentally integrate two levels of sentence structure. One, the grammatical level, is the relatively fixed sequence of subject and verb (the empty box is for everything that follows the verb):

Fixed Positions	Subject	Verb	_____	Grammar Level

The other, the story level, is based on characters and their actions and has no fixed order. Characters and actions can appear anywhere in a sentence, because writers can move them around.

But readers prefer them to align with subjects and verbs. We can represent this preference graphically:

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

Keep in mind that readers want to see characters not just *in* a subject, but *as* the subject. Not this:

> The *president's* veto of the bill INFURIATED Congress.
>
> The veto of the bill by the *president* INFURIATED Congress.

But this:

✓ When the *president* VETOED the bill, *he* INFURIATED Congress.

When you frustrate those expectations, you make readers work harder than necessary. So keep these principles in mind as you revise:

1. Express actions in verbs:

   > The **intention** of the committee is to improve morale.

   ✓ The committee **INTENDS** to improve morale.

2. Make the subjects of those verbs the characters associated with those actions:

   > A decision by the *dean* in regard to the funding of the program by the *department* is necessary for adequate *staff* preparation.

   ✓ The *staff* CAN PREPARE adequately, only after the *dean* DECIDES whether the *department* WILL FUND the program.

3. Don't revise nominalizations when:
   a. they refer to a previous sentence:

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

   b. they replace an awkward *the fact that:*

      > **The fact that she strenuously objected** impressed me.

      ✓ **Her strenuous objections** impressed me.

c. they name what would be the object of a verb:

I do not know **what she INTENDS.**

✓ I do not know **her intentions.**

d. they name a concept so familiar to your readers that it is a virtual character:

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

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

SUGGESTED ANSWERS

EXERCISE 2

Subjects are underlined, verbs CAPITALIZED, characters *italicized,* and actions **boldfaced**.

1a. There IS **opposition** among many *voters* to *nuclear power plants* BASED on a **belief** in their **threat** to human health.

1b. Many *voters* **OPPOSE** nuclear power plants because *they* **BELIEVE** that such *plants* **THREATEN** human health.

3a. There IS a **belief** among some *researchers* that *consumers*' **choices** in fast food *restaurants* ARE healthier because there ARE **postings** of nutrition information in their menus.

3b. Some *researchers* **BELIEVE** that *consumers* ARE **CHOOSING** healthier foods because fast food *restaurants* ARE **POSTING** nutrition information in their menus.

5a. Because the *student's* **preparation** for the exam WAS thorough, none of the questions on it WERE a **surprise**.

5b. Because the *student* **PREPARED** thoroughly for the exam, *she* WAS not **SURPRISED** by any of the questions on it.

EXERCISE 4

1a. Verbs: *argue, elevate.* No nominalizations.

1b. Verbs: *has been.* Nominalizations: *speculation, improving, achievement.*

3a. Verbs: *have identified, have failed, to develop, to immunize.* Nominalizations: *risk.*

3b. Verbs: *met.* Nominalizations: *attempts, defining, employment, failure.*

5a. Verbs: *resulted*. Nominalizations: *loss, share, disappearance.*

5b. Verbs: *embrace, teach.* No nominalizations.

Exercise 5

1b. Some educators have speculated about whether families can improve educational achievement (help students achieve more).

3b. Economists have attempted but failed to define full employment.

5a. When domestic automakers lost market share to the Japanese, hundreds of thousands of jobs disappeared.

Exercise 6

1. Lincoln hoped to preserve the Union without war, but when the South attacked Fort Sumter, war became inevitable.
3. Business executives predicted that the economy would quickly revive.
5. Several candidates attempted to explain why more voters participated in this year's elections.
7. The business sector did not independently study why the trade surplus suddenly increased.

Acknowledgments

Credits are listed in order of appearance.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (proposition 4.116)." Translated by C. K. Ogden, 1922; Gass, William H. "The Art of Fication No. 65." Interview with Thomas LeClair. THE PARIS REVIEW.

Glossary

Adjective: A word you can put *very* in front of: *very old, very interesting*. There are exceptions: *major, additional,* etc. Since this is also a test for ADVERBS, distinguish adjectives from adverbs by putting them between *the* and a noun: *The* ***occupational*** *hazard, the* ***major*** *reason,* etc. Some nouns also appear there—*the* ***chemical*** *hazard.*

Simple Subject: The simple subject (italicized and boldfaced) is the smallest unit inside the WHOLE SUBJECT (italicized) that determines whether a VERB (boldfaced) is singular or plural:

*The **books** that are required reading* **are** listed.

The simple subject should be as close to its verb as you can get it.

If **a book** is required reading, **it** is listed.

Whole Subject: You can identify a whole subject once you identify its VERB: Put a *who* or a *what* in front of the verb and turn the sentence into a question. The fullest answer to the question is the whole subject:

The ability of the city to manage education is an accepted fact.

Question: **What** is an accepted fact?

Answer (and whole subject): the ability of the city to manage education

Distinguish the whole subject from the SIMPLE SUBJECT:

*The **ability** of the city to manage education* is an accepted fact.

Characters

Characters

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

When character is lost, all is lost.
—ANONYMOUS

UNDERSTANDING CHARACTERS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How to Revise: Characters and Actions (Again)

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

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

The Basic Procedure

This sentence feels indirect and impersonal:

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