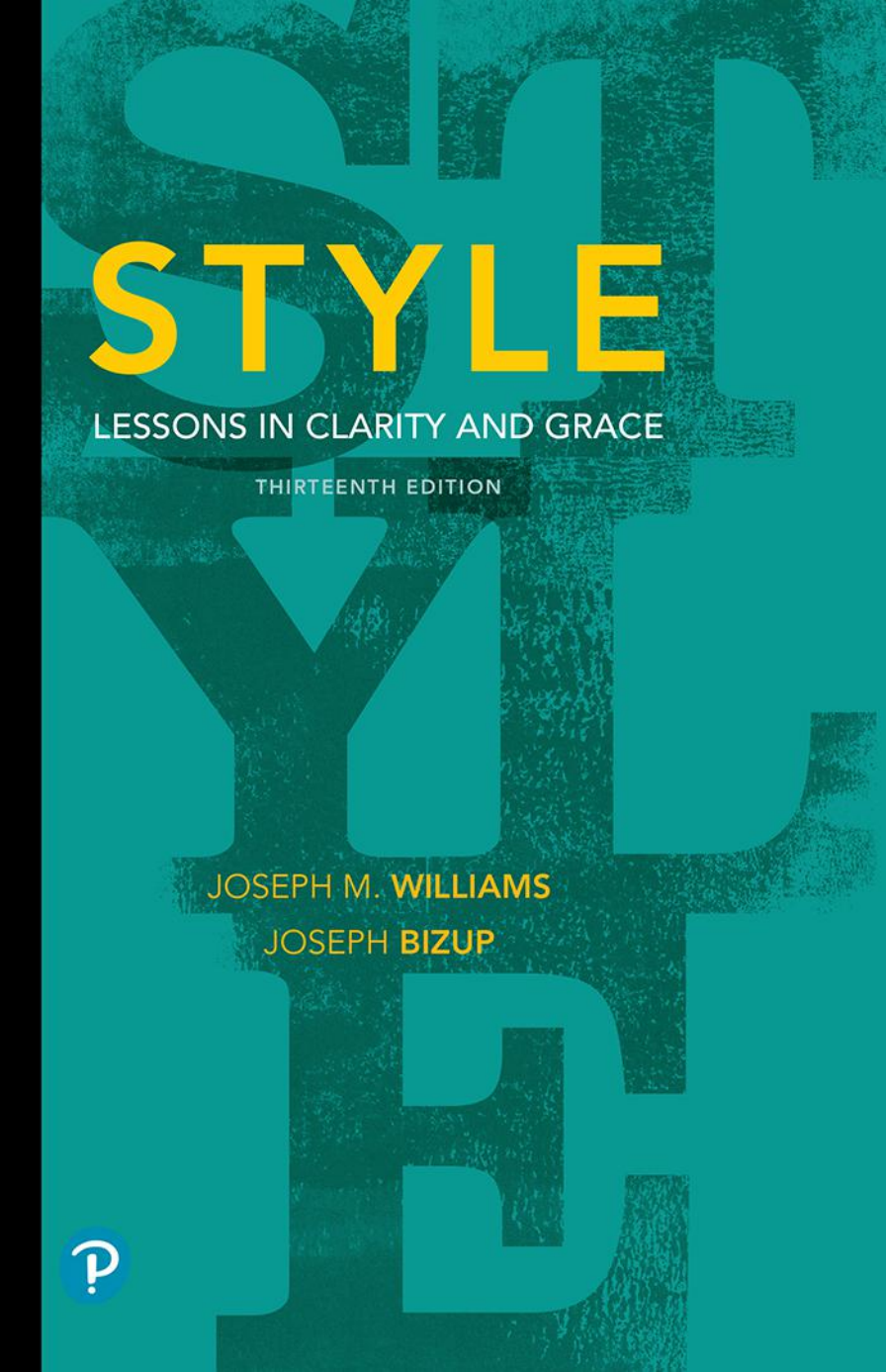
STYLE

LESSONS IN CLARITY AND GRACE

THIRTEENTH EDITION

JOSEPH M. **WILLIAMS**

JOSEPH **BIZUP**



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THIRTEENTH EDITION

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Preface

Most people won't realize that writing is a craft.
You have to take your apprenticeship in it like anything else.

—Katherine Anne Porter

In preparing this thirteenth edition of *Style*, my third, I have endeavored to refresh the book while remaining true to the qualities and features that have made it a classic of its kind. The book has demonstrated an enduring usefulness, but it is more than just a practical guide. Joseph M. Williams wrote with an urgency motivated by his conviction that clear writing not just a technical accomplishment but a social necessity and ethical good. "Writing has consequences," Joe wrote in a 1979 article anticipating his book: "Whatever does not bear on those consequences is irrelevant to our task—to help our students become what they want to be." In my own work with his text, I have tried to keep this high ideal in mind.

The most obvious changes are those prompted by the creation of a new interactive online version of the book and by the print edition's shift to a color format. I also allowed myself somewhat more authorial latitude than I did in the eleventh and twelfth editions. In those editions, my standard was to make only changes I believed Joe would have embraced. In this edition, I also introduced changes that I hope I could have persuaded Joe to accept.

What's New in the Thirteenth Edition

Here, specifically, is what's changed:

- I have retitled several of the lessons so that they better indicate their content.
- I cut the lesson on understanding style that opened previous editions. The bulk of this lesson was devoted to a short history of unclear writing in English, which, although informative, was not directly relevant to the purposes of most readers. The book now begins with a short introduction that incorporates some of the content from that deleted lesson and moves directly to the important lesson on correctness.
- To take advantage of the new color format, I updated the coding of sentences and also the diagrams illustrating the principles of style.
- I revised and updated examples and exercises throughout the book, seeking to expand the range of topics and subjects they address.

- I once again revised and expanded the section on gender-inclusive language in Lesson 1. This treatment was substantially revised for the twelfth edition, but our society's discourse on gender has progressed so much in even the past few years that another revision was needed. The book now also takes up the issue of gender-inclusive language from an ethical perspective in Lesson 11.
- I made a number of changes to the book's treatment of the ethics of style. Most obviously, I split what had been a single lesson into two: Lesson 11 now considers the ethics of clarity through a series of short examples, and Lesson 12 contains Williams's extended analysis inviting readers to ponder matters of style that transcend considerations of clarity. Most significantly, I added a new ethical principle to the book. Previous editions argued for what Williams called the First Rule of an ethical style: write to others as you would have others write to you. But this rule, in personalizing all writing, only awkwardly covers situations in which writers' interests might not entirely align with those of their readers. To accommodate those situations, I renamed Williams's First Rule of style the "golden rule" of style and introduced a second "silver rule": *do not* write to others as you would *not* have others write to you. If Williams's golden rule is a principle of empathy, its corollary silver rule is a principle of fairness. Not all situations allow writers to subordinate their interests to those of their readers, but we can still expect writers not to be deceptive, misleading, or unnecessarily obtuse. I also revised the treatment of the examples in Lesson 11 to invite more questions and discussion. Finally, in Lesson 12, I retired Williams's analysis of the Declaration of Independence, which had been in the book since the tenth edition, and replaced it with a version of his analysis of Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, a speech that in today's fractious political climate has a renewed relevance and resonance.
- I of course endeavored throughout to improve and refine the book's explanations of its concepts and principles and to eliminate errors where I found them.
- Finally, since the book's authorship has become more collective, I have somewhat wistfully decided to retire what Gregory G. Colomb, who edited the tenth edition, called Joe's "ubiquitous *I*'s." This change is not inconsequential, for in choosing to use *I*, Williams was embracing the struggles of ordinary writers as his own. But with this edition, it just seemed too artificial for me to put my words directly into his mouth. Still, despite the dropping of the first-person singular, the book continues to be animated by this basic solidarity with its readers.

What's The Same

For all these changes, the book continues to address the same questions it always has:

- What is it in a sentence that makes readers judge it as they do?
- How do we analyze our own prose to anticipate readers' judgments?
- How do we revise a sentence so that readers will think better of it?

The book's central point remains, in other words, what it always has been: that good style is a matter of making informed choices in the service of one's readers.

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Pearson is pleased to offer the following resource to qualified adopters of *Style*. This supplement is available to instantly download from Revel or on the Instructor Resource Center (IRC); please visit the IRC at **www.pearson.com/us** to register for access.

- **Instructor's Resource Manual** Create a comprehensive roadmap for teaching classroom, online, or hybrid courses. Designed for new and experienced instructors, the Instructor's Resource Manual includes learning objectives, lecture and discussion suggestions, activities for in or out of

class, research activities, participation activities, and suggested readings, series, and films as well as a Revel features section. Available within Revel and on the IRC.

Acknowledgments

Revising this book once again has been a true pleasure, and I have benefited tremendously from my conversations and correspondence with many students, colleagues, and readers. Each year, the students in my Modern English Grammar and Style Seminar at Boston University give me an opportunity to test the ideas in this book on a new audience, and the book is better for their questions and insights. I likewise learned much from the participants in the seminars I facilitated on teaching with Style at the Boston Rhetoric and Writing Network (BRAWN) Summer Institute in 2014 and 2017, as well as from the participants in a series of workshops on academic writing I conducted at Columbia University between 2012 and 2017, first for the Institute for Social & Economic Research & Policy (ISERP) and later for the Interdisciplinary Center for Innovative Theory and Empirics (INCITE). I thank William McAllister and his team for organizing and sponsoring these events.

A number of readers of previous editions of the book have emailed me detailed comments and suggestions as well as descriptions of their own experiences reading or teaching the book. Some of these initial contacts have evolved into ongoing correspondences about the book. I am grateful to all of these readers, especially William Entriken, Susan J. Fabian, Charles Fishkin, Antonio Gidi, and John Muse.

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I thank the following reviewers for their comments on the twelfth edition: Elizabeth Baldwin, University of Washington School of Law; Lauren Brodsky, Harvard Kennedy School; Christopher Shinn, Georgetown University.

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I remain indebted to Joe Williams for the time we spent together in 2008, when he visited the writing program I was then directing, and to Greg Colomb for his intellectual and professional guidance at crucial moments and for his friendship. My wife Annmarie and daughters Grace and Charlotte continue to sustain me with their love and support.

In the ninth edition, Joe acknowledged a great many people, including his students at the University of Chicago, other scholars to whom he was intellectually indebted, and the many readers and colleagues who shared observations and ideas with him. These include Theresa Ammirati, Yvonne Atkinson, Margaret Batschelet, Nancy Barendse, Charles Bazerman, Randy Berlin, Cheryl Brooke, Ken Bruffee, Christopher Buck, Douglas Butturff, Donald Byker, Bruce Campbell, Elaine Chaika, Avon Crismore, Constance Gefvert, Darren Cambridge, Mark Canada, Paul Contino, Don Freeman, Jim Garrett, Jill Gladstein, Karen Gocsik, Richard Grande, Jeanne Gunner, Maxine Hairston, Stan Henning, George Hoffman, Rebecca Moore Howard, John Hyman, Sandra Jamieson, Richard Jenseth, Elizabeth Bourque Johnson, Julie Kalish, Seth Katz, Bernadette Longo, Ted Lowe, Brij Lunine, Richard McLain, Joel Margulis, Susan Miller, Linda Mitchell, Ellen Moody, Ed Moritz, Patricia Murray, Neil Nakadate, Janice Neuleib, Ann Palkovich, Matthew Parfitt, Donna Burns Philips, Mike Pownall, Peter Priest, Keith Rhodes, John Ruszkiewicz, Margaret Shaklee, Nancy Sommers, Laura Bartlett Snyder, John Taylor, Mary Taylor, Bill Vande Kopple, James Vanden Bosch, Stephen Witte, Joseph Wappel, Alison Warriner, Wendy Wayman, Patricia Webb, Kevin Wilson, Linda Ziff. I thank them again here on his behalf.

I allow Joe to acknowledge his family himself:

And again, those who contribute to my life more than I let them know: Oliver, Michele, and Eleanor; Chris and Ingrid; Dave, Patty, Owen, and Matilde; Megan, Phil, Lily, and Calvin; and Joe, Christine, Nicholas, and Katherine. And at beginning and end still, Joan, whose patience and love flow more generously than I deserve.

Joseph Bizup
Boston, Massachusetts

In Memoriam

Joseph M. Williams, 1933–2008
il miglior fabbro [the best craftsman]
(by Gregory G. Colomb)

On February 22, 2008, the world lost a great scholar and teacher, and I lost a dear friend. For almost thirty years, Joe Williams and I taught together, researched together, wrote together, drank together, traveled together, and argued together and apart. When those "apart" arguments led to what in the last edition he called "our intemperate shouting matches," we grew closer—and wrote more thoughtfully—than ever. I knew his faults, but he was the best man I knew.

My epitaph for Joe—*il miglior fabbro*—puts him in exalted company: I take it from Dante, who applied it to the twelfth-century troubadour Arnaut Daniel, praised by Plutarch as the "Grand Master" of his craft. In the last century, T. S. Eliot famously said it of Ezra Pound. Of course, these poets were all known not for their clarity and grace but for their depth and difficulty. No matter, none have been better than they at their craft, just as none have been better than Joe at his. And Joe has the added distinction that his craft daily multiplies its good a thousand fold and more, in all those papers, reports, memos, and other documents that have served their readers better because of him.

Introduction

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

This book rests on two convictions: it is good to write clearly, and anyone can.

The first is self-evident, especially to anyone who has had to hack through a sentence like this:

> An understanding of causal factors driving male underperformance on standardized verbal proficiency tests is prerequisite to the potential development of pedagogical strategies showing greater effectiveness.

All of us would much rather read something like this:

> If we understood why male students underperform on standardized tests of verbal proficiency, we could perhaps develop better ways of teaching them.

The second, though, may seem unrealistic to those who count themselves lucky if they can just get down a thought in any words whatsoever, those who feel they have enough on their plates without worrying about how those words will seem to their readers. But to write clearly, we *must* consider our readers. Specifically, we must choose words and patterns of words that will help rather than hinder them in their efforts to understand our ideas.

This book shows you how.

The Causes of Unclear Writing

The best-known modern statement on English style, George Orwell's 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language," anatomizes the stiff and abstract language of politicians, bureaucrats, and others who strive to inflate or even hide their meaning:

> 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 in condemning 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 writers of all stripes—students, scholars, scientists, lawyers, managers, politicians, and many others—likewise embrace it. The stakes are high, as Orwell understood. Ultimately, unclear writing is not merely an inconvenience to individual readers but a social and political ill. In its extreme forms it becomes a language of obfuscation and exclusion that dampens our thinking and enables, in Orwell's words, "the defence of the indefensible." That is something a healthy, ethical society cannot tolerate. We'll consider the ethical dimension of style in Part Five.

But whatever its public consequences, unclear writing often has private causes. Some writers plump up their prose, hoping their dense sentences will indicate deep thought or mask its absence. When we try 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.

Some struggle 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 see their own writing less as a vehicle for exploring and communicating their ideas than as a minefield of potential errors. They creep from word to word, concerned less with their readers' understanding than with their own survival. But correctness is not clarity, and when we focus obsessively or exclusively on the former, we can end up sacrificing the latter. We'll take up this matter in Part One.

Some freeze up, especially when they are learning to think and write in an unfamiliar setting or context: a new class, a new field, a new profession. 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 familiar, take heart: you will write more clearly when you more fully understand what you are writing about.

But the biggest reason most of us write unclearly is that we don't know when readers are likely to find our writing unclear, much less why. Our own writing always seems clearer to us than it does to our readers because when we read it, we respond less to the words on the page or screen than to the thoughts in our own heads: we read into it what we want them to get out of it. We see what we wanted to say, and we blame our readers for not understanding us as well as we understand (or think we understand) ourselves.

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 ourselves are confused by

something written in an inaccessible style, we too easily assume that its complexity is justified by the complexity and profundity of its ideas. So we try to imitate it, making our already confused writing even worse. Sadder still, some of us become acclimated to that style, learning not only to read it but also to write it, thus inflicting it in turn on our own readers.

Parts Two and Three present principles—not rules—that you can follow to escape these traps. Once you know what features of a sentence lead readers to find one dense or confusing and another clear and direct, you can use this knowledge to serve your readers better. You can also use it to serve yourself: when you encounter difficult writing in your own reading, you will be able to untangle it so that you can grasp (or at least guess at) its meaning.

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

> The value of our shared reward will and must be measured by the joyful peace which will triumph, because the common humanity that bonds both black and white into one human race, will have said to each one of us that we shall all live like the children of paradise.
>
> Thus shall we live, because we will have created a society which recognises that all people are born equal, with each entitled in equal measure to life, liberty, prosperity, human rights and good governance.
>
> —Nelson Mandela, Nobel Lecture, December 10, 1993

Few of us will be called upon to deliver a Nobel lecture, but even on less lofty occasions, some of us take pleasure in crafting our writing so that it is not just clear but graceful. You will find suggestions in Part Four.

How to Use This Book

Here are some suggestions to help you get the most out of this book:

- This book is not a grammar book, but you will need some basic knowledge of grammar to understand its principles. Most of the grammar terms used in the book are defined in either the text or the glossary. Be sure you know at least these: *subject*, *verb*, *noun*, *active*, *passive*, *clause*, and *phrase*.
- If you are using this book for a class, work as much as you can with your fellow students. Discuss the lessons and exercises. Share and comment on one another's writing. Learn from one another.
- If you are using this book on your own, go slowly. Take the lessons a few pages at a time. Do the exercises. Edit someone else's writing. Then edit something you wrote yourself a few weeks ago, then something you wrote that day.
- Understand that as you try to apply the book's principles, you may write more slowly. That's natural, and it passes.

- Finally, remember that the book's principles have less to do with drafting than with revision. The main theme of this book is that a clear style comes from making sound choices in the service of your readers. But if you try to think about all those choices *as you draft,* you may never finish. Worse, you could find yourself paralyzed and unable to write at all. There's a term for that condition: writer's block. Most experienced writers like to get something down on paper or up on the screen as fast as they can, in whatever form they can. Then as they revise that first draft into something clearer, they begin to 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 until they run out of energy, interest, or time. For a fortunate few, that moment comes weeks, months, or 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.

  Here's the gist: 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 those sentences and passages likely to be more difficult for your readers than they need to be.

Many years ago, the great critic and journalist H. L. Mencken wrote this warning to anyone who would dare write a book on style:

> 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 many people *do* see clearly, feel deeply, and think carefully but still cannot write sentences that make their thoughts, feelings, and visions clear to others. And 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.

PART ONE

Style as Choice

English style, familiar but not coarse, and elegant,
but not ostentatious . . .
—Samuel Johnson

Lesson 1
Correctness and Style

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

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?

> A lack of sufficient funding was the cause of the program's failure.
>
> The program failed because it was underfunded.

Both are grammatically correct, but most of us would choose the second because it feels more direct.

It is good to write correctly, but correctness in writing is not the highest good. If you obsess over every rule you can find in a handbook, you deny yourself the freedom you need to write quickly and clearly. That's why we're addressing correctness now, before we turn to clarity: to put it where it belongs—behind us.

The Authority of Standard English

Some try to stay safe by memorizing and following dozens of alleged "rules" of correct grammar and usage. You could, for instance, adopt a worst-case policy: obey all the rules all the time because eventually, 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 tying yourself in knots.

The alternative to blind obedience is selective observance. But then you have to decide which rules to observe and which to ignore. If you don't follow a rule you should, you risk being labeled ignorant, uneducated, or worse. And if you choose to ignore a rule for sound reasons, you may encounter someone who, infatuated with "good" grammar, sees your split infinitive as an unmistakable sign of a more general 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 rules than the rule-mongers do.

For that, you need to know something about the authority of Standard English, the variety of English you are expected to use when you write formal papers and professional documents. (It has national variants, but for our purposes, it is enough to know that there is a standard that's expected in most academic and professional contexts.)

Opinion is split on Standard English's social role. Some see Standard English as just another device to stigmatize the language of marginalized and disenfranchised groups and thereby suppress their social and political aspirations. Others hold that Standard English, as elaborated and refined by generations of writers and grammarians, is the best of all possible Englishes. Both views contain elements of truth.

Critics of Standard English rightly note that, for centuries, those in power have used grammatical "error" to screen out those unwilling or unable to acquire the habits of the schooled middle class. But these 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 comes to be considered the most prestigious and "correct."

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	You've nothing to do but talk about
Your neebours' fauts and folly!	Your neighbors' faults and folly!

Conservatives, on the other hand, are right that many rules of Standard English originated in efficient expression and that its use by the best writers over centuries has expanded and honed its resources. But they are wrong to claim on these grounds that Standard English must be socially, intellectually, and even morally superior to other allegedly debased varieties of English.

Here's the Point

Those determined to discriminate will seize on any difference. And since language seems to directly reflect the quality of our minds, it's easy for those inclined to look down on others to think that grammatical "errors" indicate intellectual or moral deficiency. That belief is not just factually wrong; in a democracy, it is also socially destructive. Yet even if both history and logic attest to the once-respectable *ain't*, so great is the power of social convention that we avoid it, at least in our academic and professional writing.

Three Kinds of Rules

That false association between correctness and superiority has been encouraged by generations of grammarians who, in their zeal to codify "good" English, have confused three kinds of "rules."

Real Rules

Real rules define English's *grammar*, the intricate system of rules that determine how words can be combined into English sentences. Subjects typically precede verbs: *I see you*, not *See I you.* Articles must precede nouns: *the book,* not *book the.* More complexly, adjectives must appear in a certain order: it's the *little red hen*, not the *red little hen.* There are many others, and linguists are still discovering them. Those born into English don't think about these rules at all, and they violate them only when tired or distracted. In fact, if a speaker born into English does have to think about a real rule, it means the rule itself is changing as the language evolves.

Social Rules

These social rules concern not *grammar*, strictly speaking, but *usage*: they define "proper" ways of speaking and writing and distinguish Standard English from other varieties. For example, *He don't have no money* is a grammatical English sentence, but its violation of two social rules—the nonstandard inflection of the helping verb *do* and the double negative—disqualifies it as Standard English. Writers with a strong command of Standard English think about its social rules mainly when they notice others violating them or when they themselves intentionally violate them for effect.

Invented Rules

Finally, there's a handful of invented rules that some grammarians think we all *should* observe. Like social rules, these invented rules are rules of usage, but they are more artificial and more brittle. They 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, as in *something you put up* ***with****.*

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 hundreds of years, grammarians have condemned writers for violating such rules, and for just as long, the best writers have ignored them (both the rules and the grammarians). Which is lucky for the grammarians, because if writers did obey all the rules, the grammarians would have to invent new ones—or find

another line of work. To be sure, even the best writers commit occasional errors, but just knowing these three types of rules will help you put those errors into perspective. The standard for what is or is not an error must be the unself-conscious consensus of the most capable writers and their most competent readers.

We can sort most invented rules into two groups: *folklore* and *elegant options*. Folklore is usually ignored by competent, unself-conscious writers, without objection from their readers. You can ignore those rules too, unless you're writing in a setting where correctness is what matters most.

Elegant options are invented rules that complement the real rules of grammar and the social rules of usage. With real rules, most readers do not notice when you observe them, but does notice when you violates them (like that). With elegant options, it is the reverse: few readers notice when you violate them, but some notice when you observe them because doing so adds a bit of polish to your writing.

Invented Rules: 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 from writers who, on matters of usage, are reliable conservatives (some are both). A check mark indicates acceptable Standard English, despite what some grammarians claim.

"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 sentences 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 bit of folklore probably stems from a schoolhouse restriction intended to discourage sentence fragments in responses to prompts:

> Why did the dialect of London become Standard English?
>
> **Because** London was the economic and political center of Great Britain.

Quick Tip

At best, this rule about *because* reflects a small truth of style. As you will see in Lesson 4, 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.

"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 that earlier sentence, no such reasons interpose: Barzun's own sense of style simply led him to prefer *which*.

This "rule" is relatively new. It first appeared in 1906 in Henry and Francis Fowler's *The King's English*. The Fowlers thought 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:

> ✓ The company 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 filing date in the following *which* clause. We 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:

> ✓ Their boutique only sells clothing **that** [*not* **which**] is made from sustainably-sourced materials.

Since the relative clause in this sentence (*that . . . materials*) limits or "restricts" the meaning of *clothing*, it should, according to the Fowlers, begin with *that*. (For another allegedly incorrect *which*, see the passage by Walter Ong on p. 9.)

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.

There is no reason not to follow the Fowlers' advice, but you have to trust your ear. For example, you might sometimes choose a *which* when it's within a word or two of a *that* to avoid the awkward 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.

"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*).

"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 in Standard English 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. Some are true invented rules; others are fading real rules that writers revive—in a sense reinvent—as options of style. Either way, you can use them as you like to make your writing sound more formal. Readers most notice elegant options not when they are broken or ignored but when they are followed.

"Don't split infinitives."

Purists condemn Dwight Macdonald, himself a linguistic archconservative, for this sentence (boldface added 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," *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.

"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:

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

The first is correct; the second is more formal. (Again, see the Ong passage on p. 9.) Some conservatives apply this rule not only to sentences but to every clause.

"Use *whom* as the object of a verb or preposition."

This was once a real rule, but since *whom* is disappearing from the language, it is now an elegant option. 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: "**Whom** am I writing for?"

or more formal yet, to avoid ending with a preposition,

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

"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 slightly 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 follow them selectively, 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, perhaps even stiff, your writing seems.

Hobgoblins

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

"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."

"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*.)

"Don't use *finalize* to mean 'finish' or 'complete.'"

Finalize doesn't mean just "finish." It means "to clean up the last few details," a sense captured by no other word.

"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.

"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 rule is generally worth following.

"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.

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 a *horrible wrong*. It does not mean *enormousness*. 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, you are simply expected as an educated writer 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 will 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.

Gender and Style

Language changes as society changes, and today we're experiencing major shifts in how we think about gender. Usages that were once unremarkable now seem outdated or even sexist, and new usages that even a few years ago would have been rejected are becoming more accepted—in some circles, settings, and contexts. What does this mean for you? Well, how you choose to handle gender in your writing is something your readers will notice, and it is something on which they will judge not just your ideas but also your values, politics, and even character. It's a complicated landscape. Here are some ways to navigate it.

Gender-Specific Nouns

To avoid seeming, at best, hopelessly old-fashioned, you should generally steer clear of gender-specific nouns. Here are two rules of thumb:

- Avoid using nouns gendered as feminine when their counterparts are not explicitly gendered masculine. Use the formerly masculine noun for all genders or find an alternative. A woman who tells jokes for a living is not

a *comedienne* but a *comedian* or a *comic.* A woman throwing a party is not its *hostess* but its *host*. Be especially careful with words that refer to traditionally female jobs or professions: a woman who keeps you safe and comfortable on an airplane is not a *stewardess* but a *flight attendant*. But when both words in a pair are explicitly gendered, they can be acceptable: a female ruler of a kingdom is still its *queen* and a male ruler its *king.*

- Avoid using nouns formed with *-man* when the gender of the person referred to is irrelevant, and don't simply substitute *-woman* or *-person* for *-man* unless you want to draw attention to that choice. A professor who leads a department is its *chair*, not its *chairman* or *chairwoman* or *chairperson.* Similarly, a person working in law enforcement is a *police officer.*

Pronouns and Gender: The Problem of Agreement

It's fairly easy to find alternatives to gender-specific nouns because new nouns can always be borrowed or invented. Pronouns, though, are different because, like articles (*the, a, an*) and conjunctions (*and, but, or*), they are part of the structure of the language. A new noun just gets added to the language's potentially endless inventory of nouns; it doesn't affect anything else. A new pronoun would change the language itself, so the barriers to its acceptance are far greater. That difference makes the issue of gendered pronouns trickier than the issue of gendered nouns. Here's how:

Just as we expect verbs to agree with their subjects, so we expect pronouns to agree in number with their referents. But that 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 indefinite pronouns that are singular in form but 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.

Eminent writers have used *they* in this generic sense since at least the fourteenth century. In formal writing, though, many writers and readers, especially those with an attachment to tradition, 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—*The mermaid waved her tail*—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 hesitate in formal writing to use *they* as a singular pronoun, and we also reject *he* as biased, we are confronted with a delicate problem of style. The thing to remember is that we have choices.

Pronouns and Gender: Inclusive Options

English may not (yet) have a universally accepted gender-neutral singular third-person pronoun, but it does offer good options to careful writers who want to write in an inclusive 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 it can be cumbersome if a sentence contains several pronouns. And this solution is not entirely inclusive, as some people identify as neither male nor female.

   Rephrase in the plural: 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 if **we** want **our** readers to see **us** as modern and progressive.

But *we* can be ambiguous or 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 less clear (see Lesson 2 and 3).

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 italicized).

✓ 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. 141). 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 this book does. Some readers find this solution stylistically intrusive, but it is an option that is becoming familiar.

Non-Binary Pronouns

We've shown you several ways to write in an inclusive or gender-neutral fashion. But there is still another issue: how to refer to people who identify as neither male or female, or as non-binary? We could adopt a new system of English pronouns, and several have been proposed over the last few decades. But none of those systems, at least to date, has been widely accepted by English speakers.

An increasingly popular alternative is to use the singular *they* as a non-binary pronoun, to refer not just to a referent whose gender is unknown but to individuals known to identify as non-binary:

✓ Casey informed **their** teacher that **they** preferred neither of the traditional third-person singular pronouns.

In 2016, the American Dialect Society named *they* used in this way as its "Word of the Year," and it is now being recognized even by style guides that still balk at the use of *they* with indefinite referents, at least in formal contexts. Ultimately, it is less a matter of correctness or even style than of ethics, and we'll consider it again in Lesson 11.

The Future

What will the future bring? It's hard to know. One of the new pronoun systems might succeed in achieving a critical mass of acceptance and be integrated into the language. Such attempts at linguistic engineering, however, are rarely successful. But if engineering doesn't work, evolution certainly will. The one constant with language is that it changes to meet its users' needs, offering new choices in response to new social realities. But whatever the future, we have choices now, and from the perspective of style, that's what matters.

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?

It's possible 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 their personal style. Some of us are straightforward and plain speaking; others take pleasure in a touch of formality or fastidious "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 correctness but clarity and grace.

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PART TWO

Clarity

Everything that can be thought at all
can be thought clearly.
Everything that can be said can be said clearly.
—Ludwig Wittgenstein

It takes less time to learn to write nobly than to
learn to write lightly and straightforwardly.
—Friedrich Nietzsche

Lesson 2
Actions

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action.
—William Shakespeare, Hamlet, 3.2

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 in those two sentences makes readers feel as they do. Only then can you know when your readers will think your writing needs revising and, when it does, what to do. This lesson's basic insight is this: in general, the sentences readers find clear are those that tell good stories. When you understand what counts as a well-told story, you will know when your readers are likely to think your writing needs revising and then what to do.

To grasp this lesson and the next three, you must be able to identify *whole subjects, simple subjects*, and *verbs*. Every sentence or clause has two parts: the subject and the predicate. The whole subject is the noun phrase, or full unit of information, that serves as that subject. The simple subject is the noun in that unit that everything else in it refers to or modifies. (When you see references to the *subject* of a sentence, they usually mean the simple subject.) The verb is the action word or linking word in the predicate that agrees with the subject. If you can't easily identify these three elements, see the Glossary.

Telling Stories: Characters and Actions

This story has a problem:

> **2a.** Once upon a time, a walk through the woods was taking place on the part of Little Red Riding Hood, when 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 the subjects of verbs.
- Those verbs express specific actions.

Principle of Clarity 1: Make Main Characters Subjects

Look at the subjects in **2a**. Whole subjects are underlined; simple subjects are italicized. Those simple subjects do not name the main characters (gold) in the story. Instead, they are actions expressed in abstract nouns, *walk* and *jump:*

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

The whole subject of the verb *occurred* does have a character in it: the possessive noun *Wolf's*. But the Wolf is not *the* subject (that is, the simple subject). That character appears only as a modifier of the simple subject *jump*.

Contrast the subjects in **2a** with those in **2b**, where the characters (gold) are also the subjects (again, whole subjects are underlined; simple subjects are italicized):

> ✓ **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 simple subjects and main characters are now the same words:

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

Notice too that when simple subjects are characters, the whole subjects are also shorter: in that first subject, *Little Red Riding Hood*, they are the same. In the second, *the Wolf*, the whole subject only includes one additional word, the article *the*.

Principle of Clarity 2: Make Important Actions Verbs

Now look at the verbs in **2a**: *was taking*, *occurred*. Notice how vague they are. The characters' actions (pink) are expressed not in those verbs (boldfaced) but in abstract nouns:

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

The story isn't about *taking place* and *occurring* but about *walking* and *jumping* and *frightening*. In **2b**, 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.

Consider these two principles together. In **2a**, the characters are not named by the subjects, and the important actions are not expressed as verbs:

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

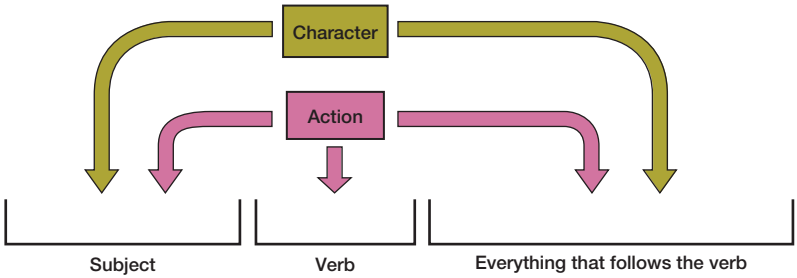
In **2b**, the characters do line up with subjects, and those important actions are expressed as verbs (notice that gold words are now also italicized, and pink words are now also boldfaced):

SUBJECT/CHARACTER	VERB
Little Red Riding Hood	**was walking**
the *Wolf*	**jumped** . . . **frightened**

That is why most readers find **2b** clearer than **2a**.

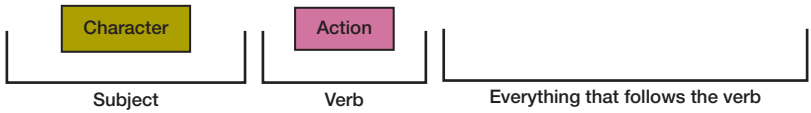
You can picture these principles graphically. In English sentences, the subject almost always comes before the verb, like this:

You can think of these subject and verb positions as fixed grammatical "slots." Characters and actions, on the other hand, can appear almost anywhere. You can think of them as "story" elements that writers can move around:



But readers prefer characters to align with subjects and actions with verbs. So when you are reviewing your writing, take note if you come across a sentence structured like this, where the character is not in the subject slot or the action is not in the verb slot:

Consider rearranging it so that those story elements appear like this:



Keep in mind that readers want to see characters not just *in* the (whole) subject, but *as* the (simple) subject. When you frustrate those expectations, you make readers work harder than necessary.

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. Mayoral support for the school consolidation proposal was based on a belief that it could yield significant cost reductions without having an adverse effect on student standardized test performance.

✓ **3b.** The mayor supported the proposal to consolidate schools because she believed that it could significantly reduce costs without adversely affecting students' performance on standardized tests.

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 (gold)—the *mayor, proposal, students*—are not subjects. Its whole subject (underlined) contains two

of these characters, but neither is the simple subject (italicized). Instead, that simple subject is the abstraction *support:*

> **3a.** Mayoral *support* for the school consolidation proposal was based on a belief that *it* could yield significant cost reductions without having an adverse effect on student standardized test performance.

Second, the important actions (pink) in the sentence are not verbs (boldfaced) but abstract nouns:

> **3a.** Mayoral support for the school consolidation proposal **was based on** a belief that it **could yield** significant cost reductions without **having** an adverse effect on student standardized test performance.

Notice also how long and complex is the whole subject of **3a** and how little meaning is expressed by its main verb *was based on:*

WHOLE SUBJECT	VERB
Mayoral support for the school consolidation proposal	was based on

Readers think **3b** is clearer for two reasons: the simple subjects (italicized) of the sentence and its dependent clauses are characters (gold), and its actions (pink), with only one exception, are verbs (boldfaced):

> ✓ **3b.** The *mayor* **supported** the proposal to consolidate schools because *she* **believed** that *it* **could** significantly **reduce** costs without adversely **affecting** students' performance on standardized tests.

Again, when we make characters the simple subjects, the whole subjects (underlined) also become short and concrete. (If you are wondering why we are treating *proposal* as a character or why we did not change *performance* into a verb, see pp. 37–38.)

A Simple Test for Clarity

You can use this connection between fairy tales and serious writing to test how clear a sentence is likely to seem to readers. Just plug the subject and the verb into this template:

> Once upon a time, there was [subject], and one day he/she/it [**verb**].

If you get a good story, your sentence will probably seem clear:

> **2b.** Once upon a time, there was Little Red Riding Hood, and one day she **was walking**…
>
> **3b.** Once upon a time, there was the mayor, and one day she **supported**…

These sentences tell good stories because we can picture the character named by the subject doing the action expressed by the verb. But if you get something

that doesn't sound like a story at all, the sentence could probably be clearer. Here is that test using **2a** and **3a**, first with simple subjects and then with whole subjects:

2a. Once upon a time, there was a walk, and one day it **was taking place**…

3a. Once upon a time, there was support, and one day it **was based on**…

2a. Once upon a time, there was a walk through the woods, and one day it **was taking place**…

3a. Once upon a time, there was mayoral support for the school consolidation proposal, and one day it **was based on**…

It is hard for readers to picture any of these stories, and that is why those sentences seem unclear.

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

Finding Actions in a Sentence

Our first 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 (pink) are not verbs (boldfaced) but 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, most of the actions are 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 by adding suffixes such as *-tion*, *-ment*, and *-ance*, and especially when you use those abstract nouns as subjects.

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 2.1

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 2.2

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 ebooks is driven by a preference of many readers for their convenience and portability.

2b. The market for ebooks has grown because many readers prefer their convenience and portability.

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

3b. Some researchers believe that consumers are choosing healthier foods at fast food restaurants because they 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 to her.

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

Exercise 2.3

Create three sentences using verbs and adjectives from Exercise 2.1. 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.

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

How to Revise: Characters and Actions

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

The Problem of Familiarity

We first need to understand the problem. 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. That happens to most experienced writers. And almost always, their readers can see where their writing needs work better than they can.

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.

A Procedure for Revising Sentences

Since we can't assume that readers' judgments of our sentences will match our own, we need a more objective way to look at our writing, a way that sidesteps our too-good understanding of it. You can use our 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 those principles to identify and revise sentences that seem clear to you but might not to your readers. Revision is a three-step process: analyze, assess, rewrite.

1. Analyze

a. Ignoring short (up to 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 (more about this in the next lesson):

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.

How to Revise: Nominalizations

You can quickly spot and revise five common patterns of nominalizations (nominalizations are capitalized).

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 *reporter* **conducted** an INVESTIGATION of the matter.

a. Change the nominalization to a verb:

INVESTIGATION → **investigate**

b. Replace the empty verb with that new verb:

✓ The *reporter* **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. Change 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 a 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 a need for our further study of this problem.

c. Make that character the subject of the verb:

NEED → *we* **need** our STUDY → *we* **study**

✓ *We* **need to 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**

✓ *We* **reviewed** the EVOLUTION of the brain.

✓ *We* **reviewed** how the *brain* **evolved**.

Quick Tip

When you revise a complicated sentence, you will likely 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 Benefits of Making Actions Verbs

When you consistently rely on verbs (boldfaced) to express important actions (pink), your readers benefit in many ways:

1. Your sentences are more concrete:

There **was** a directorial decision for program 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 more explicit. 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 (numbers refer to the real sequence of events). Compare:

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 2.4

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. Most people accept that atmospheric carbon dioxide elevates global temperatures.

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. Although researchers understand the cause of the common cold, they have failed to develop a vaccine to immunize those most 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 online stores resulted in the closing of many suburban shopping malls.

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

6a. We need to discover which populations are most at risk of developing dementia so that we can intervene effectively.

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

Exercise 2.5

Now revise the nominalized sentences in Exercise 2.4 into sentences in which the actions are verbs. Use as your model the clear sentence with which the nominalized sentence

is paired. For example, if the clear sentence begins with *when*, your revision should also begin 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 2.6

Revise these next sentences so that actions are expressed not as nominalizations but as verbs with characters as their subjects. In sentences 1 through 4, characters are in gold and nominalizations are capitalized.

1. The developer's HOPE was for a COMPLETION of the facility before the end of the year, but the contractor's FAILURE to remain on schedule made that an IMPOSSIBILITY.
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 in gold; 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

We 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 (verbs are boldfaced, nominations are capitalized):

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.

Such nominalizations link one sentence to another in a cohesive flow, an issue we'll address in more detail in Lesson 4.

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**.
>
> ✓ 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 (more about this in the next lesson):

> ✓ The DEBATE **focused** on the value of public EDUCATION.
>
> ✓ All reputable scientists **accept** EVOLUTION as a fact.
>
> ✓ TAXATION without REPRESENTATION **did** not **spark** the American REVOLUTION.

You must develop an eye for distinguishing nominalizations like these, which all name familiar concepts, from those you can revise into verbs:

> The candidate's REFUSAL **to contest** the results of the ELECTION was a DISAPPOINTMENT to her supporters.
>
> ✓ The candidate **refused to contest** the results of the ELECTION, **disappointing** her supporters.

A final observation before we end: your readers want you to write clearly, even simply—but not simplistically (see p. 16). 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 Lessons 9 and 10 we look at ways to write longer sentences that communicate complex ideas but are still readable.

Exercise 2.7 In Your Own Words

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 important actions with verbs.

Exercise 2.8 In Your Own Words

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 pp. 32–33 to explain any differences in your ratings. Revise your writing if necessary.

Summing Up

Readers want to see actions as verbs and characters as subjects (not just *in* subjects). So keep these two principles in mind as you write and 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 college is necessary for adequate staff preparation.

✓ The *staff* can prepare adequately only after the *dean* decides whether the *college* will fund the program.

Consider keeping 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:

✓ Everyone passed the EXAMINATION.

✓ The PETITION to put the AMENDMENT on the ballot succeeded.

Lesson 3
Characters

When character is lost, all is lost.
—Anonymous

Readers think sentences are clear and direct when they see key actions in their verbs. Compare these sentences:

> **1a.** The researchers expected that the Institutional Review Board would recommend that they revise the study.
>
> **1b.** The researchers had an expectation that the Institutional Review Board would make a recommendation that they undertake a revision of the study.
>
> **1c.** The expectation of the researchers was that the recommendation of the Institutional Review Board would be for a revision of the study.

Most readers find **1b** less clear than **1a**. But they find **1c** much less clear than either of the other two. The reason is this: in both **1a** and **1b**, the important characters (gold) are simple subjects (italicized) of verbs (bold). Even though **1b** expresses important actions as abstractions (capitalized) rather than verbs, its subjects are still characters:

> **1a.** The *researchers* **expected** that the *Institutional Review Board* would **recommend** that *they* **revise** the study.
>
> **1b.** The *researchers* **had** an EXPECTATION that the *Institutional Review Board* would **make** a RECOMMENDATION that *they* **undertake** a REVISION of the study.

But in **1c** the simple subjects are not concrete characters but abstractions (italicized words are not gold but capitalized):

> **1c.** The *EXPECTATION* of the researchers **was** that the *RECOMMENDATION* of the Institutional Review Board would **be** for a REVISION of the study.

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

> **1d.** There was an expectation that the recommendation would be for a revision of the study.

Who expects? Who recommends? Who revises? Context might help readers guess correctly, but if it is ambiguous, they could guess 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 as 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)

This sentence, for example, feels indirect and impersonal:

> In most instances, governmental intervention in fast-changing industries leads to a predictable distortion of market evolution and interference in new product development.

We can analyze and revise it according to our procedure from Lesson 2:

1. **Skipping short introductory phrases, underline the first seven or eight words.**

   > In most instances, governmental intervention in fast-changing industries leads to a predictable distortion of market evolution and interference in new product development.

   In those first words, readers want to see characters not just *in* the whole subject, as *government* is implied in *governmental*, but *as* the simple subject. Here they aren't.

2. **Find the main characters.** They may be objects of prepositions (particularly *by* and *of*), possessive nouns or pronouns attached to nominalizations, or only implied. In that sentence, one possible character, *industries*, is a noun. Another, *government*, is in the adjective *governmental*. A third, *market*, modifies the object of a preposition: *of market evolution.*

3. **Skim the sentence and others around it for actions involving those characters.** Look for actions buried in adjectives (*predictable* → *predict*) and especially in nominalizations: *intervention*, *distortion*, *evolution*, *interference*, *development*.

4. **Pair characters with actions expressed as verbs.** To decide which actions go with which characters, ask *Who is doing what?* Be aware that just like actions, characters can also hide in adjectives (*governmental* → *government*):

governmental INTERVENTION	→	government **intervenes**
DISTORTION	→	[government] **distorts**
market EVOLUTION	→	markets **evolve**
INTERFERENCE	→	[government] **interferes**
DEVELOPMENT	→	[markets] **develop**

5. **Reassemble those subjects and verbs into a new sentence.** Use conjunctions such as *if*, *although*, *because*, *when*, *how*, and *why* to show how the ideas in the sentence fit together:

✓ In most instances, when government intervenes in fast-changing industries, it predictably distorts how markets evolve and interferes with the development of new products.

(Notice that you don't have to pair every potential character with an action or turn every potential action into a verb. In this case, we didn't use *industries* as a subject, and we retained the nominalization *development*.)

Here's the Point

The first step in analyzing a dense style is to look at subjects. If you do not see main characters as simple subjects, you have to look for them. They can be in objects of prepositions, in possessive pronouns, or in adjectives. Once you find them, look for actions they are involved in. When you are revising, make those characters the subjects of verbs expressing those actions. When you are reading a dense passage, try to find characters and their actions, and retell the story to yourself.

Reconstructing Absent Characters

Readers have the biggest problem with sentences devoid of *all* characters:

A decision was made in favor of doing an analysis of the disagreement.

That sentence could mean either of these, and more:

We decided that I should analyze why they disagreed.

I decided that you should analyze why she disagreed.

The writer may know who is doing what, and readers may be able to guess from context. But often they can't and will need help.

Sometimes we omit characters to make a general statement:

> An understanding of the cause of bipolar disorder requires attention to multiple variables rather than an assumption that the disorder is dependent on a single biological or environmental factor.

But when we try to revise that into something clearer, we have to invent characters (gold) and then decide what to call them. Do we use *one*, *we* or *you?* Do we name a generic "doer"?

> ✓ If one/we/you/researchers are to understand what causes bipolar disorder, one/we/you/they should attend to multiple variables rather than assuming that it depends on a single biological or environmental factor.

To most of us, *one* feels stiff, but *we* may be ambiguous because it can refer just to the writer, to the writer and others but not the reader, to the writer and reader but not others, or to everyone. And if you are not directly addressing your reader (as we do), *you* is usually too casual.

But if you avoid both nominalizations and vague pronouns, you can slide into passive verbs (we'll discuss them in a moment):

> To understand what causes bipolar disorder, multiple variables should **be attended to**, rather than it **being assumed** that the disorder depends on a single biological or environmental factor.

To reconstruct missing characters, you have to use your judgment. In general, choose the most specific characters you can find.

Quick Tip

When you are explaining a complicated issue to someone involved in it, imagine sitting across the table from that person, saying *you* as often as you can:

> Taxable intangible property includes financial notes and municipal bonds. A one-time tax of 2% on its value applies to this property.
>
> ✓ You have to pay tax on your intangible property, including your financial notes and municipal bonds. On this property, you pay a one-time tax of 2%.

If *you* doesn't seem appropriate, change it to a character that is:

> ✓ Taxpayers have to pay tax on their intangible property, including their financial notes and municipal bonds. They pay…

Abstractions as Characters

So far, we have treated characters as if they must be flesh-and-blood people. But inanimate things and even abstractions can serve as characters, so long as you make them the subjects of a series of sentences that tell a story. For instance, we

might have solved the problem of the previous example by choosing *studies* as our character (gold):

> ✓ To understand what causes bipolar disorder, studies should attend to multiple factors rather than assuming that it depends on a single biological or environmental factor.

Now the sentence is clear but also appropriately professional.

You can also tell stories whose main characters are abstractions, even nominalizations. All things being equal, you should prefer concrete characters. But there are circumstances when a more abstract version of a story is better. These four sentences all convey the same message, but they do it at different levels of abstraction:

> **2a.** You can grow sustainably by gradually expanding retail outlets in underserved areas.
>
> **2b.** The company can grow sustainably by gradually expanding retail outlets in underserved areas.
>
> **2c.** Sustainable growth can be achieved through a gradual expansion of retail outlets in underserved areas.
>
> **2d.** Achievement of sustainable growth is possible through retail outlet expansion in underserved areas.

Sentence **2a** is the most concrete because it has a flesh-and-blood character as its subject: *you*. You might use this sentence if you were addressing a company executive directly. The next sentence **2b** is just a bit more abstract because its subject is not a person, but *company* is still a concrete character. In both **2a** and **2b**, the character in the subject is paired with a verb that names its action: *grow*. With **2c**, however, the focus shifts from a concrete character to an abstract concept: *growth.* And because we have turned that important action into an abstract noun, we need to use another verb in the sentence. But even though this sentence is abstract, it might be right for its context. For example, perhaps you want that executive to focus on the goal of *growth* in itself. On the other hand, the simple subject of **2d**, *achievement*, is excessively abstract and should be revised. The point is this: as a default, choose the most concrete characters you can, but more than that, tell the right story.

The way to make an abstraction into a character is to make it the subject of a series of sentences and clauses. (We'll talk more about this issue in Lesson 4 when we discuss *topics*.) Here's a story about *freedom of speech* (gold), a familiar abstraction made up of two nominalizations (whole subjects are underlined):

> No human right is more basic than freedom of speech, which ensures individual expression and guarantees the open flow of ideas in society. It arose as a pillar of modern political thought during the late eighteenth century, and in 1948, it was recognized by the United Nations as a universal right. It protects not only