

Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace: Lesson 3

Telling stories about characters and actions:

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

We need to rethink sentence structure, supplementing the notion of a subject and a verb (the most basic components of a sentence) with the concept of characters and actions.

- Express main characters as subjects
- Express actions as verbs

The Dreaded Nominalization

Often the difference between a clear style and an unclear style is the level of nominalization. Nominalization is the changing of verbs (and adjectives) into nouns, such as making the verb "to know" into "knowledge." This is a natural part of language, but some writers over-nominalize and produce prose like this:

Many colleges have come to the realization that continued increases in tuition are no longer possible because of strong resistance from parents to the high cost of higher education.

This sentence could be rewritten as:

Many colleges realize that continued tuition increases are no longer possible, because parents strongly resist the high cost of higher education.

Finding Nominalizations

Williams offers the following good advice:

Diagnosis:

Ignoring short introductory phrases ("In the meantime," "Although," etc.), underline the first seven or eight words in each sentence.

Look for three characteristics: 1) Sentences that begin not with characters, but abstract nouns. 2) Sentences that take more than six or seven words to get to a verb. 3) Verbs that are less specific than the actions buried in the nouns around them.

Analysis:

Find or invent your cast of characters. (Who is doing the action?)

Find nominalizations that name the actions those characters perform.

Revision:

Change the nominalizations into verbs and adjectives.

Make the characters the subjects of those new verbs.

Rewrite the sentence with conjunctions like *because, if, when, although, why, how, whether, that*.

Revise these sentences so that the nominalizations are verbs and characters are the subjects of those verbs. In the first two characters are italicized and nominalizations are boldfaced.

1. **Attempts** were made on the part of the *President's aides* to assert *his immunity* from a Congressional subpoena.
2. The *author's analysis* of our data omits any **citation** of *sources* that would provide **support** for *his criticism* of our **argument**.
3. The agreement by the participants on the program was based on the assumption that there was a promise of federal funds.
4. The board's rejection of our proposal was a disappointment but not a surprise because of our expectation that a decision had already been made in regard to a delay of any new initiatives.