

## Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace: Lesson 4

Lesson 3 stressed expressing crucial actions in verbs. This practice requires that you avoid whenever possible nominalization (turning a verb into a noun) which tends to hide the action of a sentence in a noun. Likewise, we should try to locate the "characters" of our sentences as the subjects of our sentences whenever possible.

Consider these sentences from Williams:

- 1a. There were fears that there would be a recommendation for a reduction in the budget.
- 1b. The fear on the part of the CIA was that a recommendation from the president would go to Congress for a reduction in its budget.
- 2a. The CIA had fears that the president would send a recommendation to Congress that it make a reduction in its budget.
- 2b. The CIA feared the president would recommend to Congress that it should reduce its budget.

Which is clearer and why?

### Finding and Relocating Characters

Williams offers this advice:

1. Look at the beginning of sentences (the first six or seven words after any short introductory phrases). Your readers are likely to have a problem if they don't see a character as a subject.
2. If your sentence begins with abstractions, look for the "real" characters of the sentence. They may be in a possessive pronouns attached to a nominalization, in objects of prepositions (especially by and of), or even implied in an adjective.
3. Skim the passage for important actions, particularly those buried in nominalizations, then convert them to verbs, and make the relevant characters their subjects.
4. Finally, reassemble the pieces into sentences, making use of subordinators (if, although, because, that, when, how and so on) to tie the parts together.

### Abstractions as Characters

Sometimes it is easy to find and reconstruct the missing or hidden characters. For example, it might be easy to fix the following sentence:

The revision process has been the object of discussion.  
We have discussed the revision process.

Diagnose and revise the following sentences. Make sure each has a specific character as subject of a specific verb. You may have to invent characters.

1. In almost all cases, decisions about forcibly administering medication in an emergency room setting despite the inability of an irrational patient to provide legal consent is an on-scene medical decision.
2. With the decline in network television viewing in favor of cable and rental cassettes, awareness is growing at the networks of changes in tastes and viewing habits, resulting in a need to change programming accordingly.

Revise these passages. Change passive verbs to active ones only where you think doing so will improve the sentence.

1. Home mortgage loans now are made for thirty years. With the price of housing at inflated levels, those loans cannot be paid off in any shorter period of time.
2. Many arguments were advanced against Darwinian evolution in the nineteenth century because basic assumptions about our place in the world were challenged by it. No longer were we defined as privileged creatures but rather as a product of natural forces.

Sometimes, though, there are no flesh-and-blood characters around which to build our sentences. For example, what is the "character" in the following sentence?

Privacy protections have not kept pace with technology, and some even argue that they have been eroded by technology and by a court system dominated by prosecutors.

As Williams points out, a character is not just a person, but whomever or whatever you can tell a story about.

### The Passive Voice

Most writers have been told at one time or another to not use the passive voice, because it is an indirect way of writing and it seems to encourage an impersonal tone. However, sometimes the passive voice is necessary. In addition, we should not assume that writing with characters and actions requires us to avoid the passive.

### Choosing Between Active and Passive

Williams identifies three questions that you must ask yourself when considering whether the active or the passive is most appropriate:

1. Must my readers know who is responsible for the action?

Sometimes we don't know who is responsible for the action, sometimes we can assume our readers don't care, and sometimes we know but we don't want them to know.

2. Would the active or the passive verb let me arrange words in an order that helps my readers move smoothly from one sentence to the next?

Sentences often begin with old information and then introduce new information. The old information is often carried over from the previous sentence. Sometimes using the passive allows you to shift the old information to the front of a sentence. Williams claims that this is the main reason for the passive.

3. Would the active or passive create a consistent and appropriate sequence of subjects representing characters that I want my readers to focus on?

Readers follow the flow or sequence of your thoughts when you use a consistent set of characters. Sometimes the passive allows you to shift an important character to the subject position of the sentence.