

Readability, Clarity, and Style

Have you ever picked up a piece of writing by a student, a friend or a colleague, that seemed intelligent and well-informed, but was quite difficult to read? Did you have trouble figuring out exactly what was going wrong? It is likely that the problem had to do with the writer's style.

Style is often neglected by writing teachers, because there are usually so many other problems to remedy. However, even for non-native speakers who are still struggling with English grammar, stylistic changes can significantly improve readability, with the result that grammatical problems cause less confusion and are less noticeable.

For stylistic problems we recommend the book *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* by Joseph Williams, which presents a functional approach to clear sentence writing. By "functional" we mean that readers will be able to tell "who's doing what to whom" when they look at prose written according to Williams' guidelines. Just as we readily comprehend a story because it consists of characters performing actions, so will readers more easily understand prose when it consists of sentences with grammatical subjects as characters and verbs as actions.

Characters in Action

To see the power of this simple principle, look at what happens to sentence (1a) when we make its characters clear:

(1a) Our lack of assessment data prevented meaningful evaluation of program effectiveness in the improvement of the writing skills of students at the greatest risk.

(1b) Because we lacked assessment data, we could not evaluate whether the program had improved the writing skills of at risk students.

When the characters or actors are the subjects of verbs, the sentence is clearer and easier to read. Notice also that in (1a) actions are not verbs, but nouns ("lack," "evaluation," "improvement") as is typical of a bureaucratic nominalized style (a nominalization is an abstract noun derived from a verb or adjective). In (1b) these actions are verbs: "lacked," "evaluate," "improve."

Watch these next sentences become clearer as their verbs express more specific actions:

(2a) There has been the effective exercise of information dissemination control on the part of the Secretary.

(2b) The Secretary has exercised effective staff information dissemination control.

Avoid Nominalizations

English has an uncommon ability to make verbs into nouns, and to use nouns as adjectives. Sentence (2b) eliminates the weak use of "there" as a grammatical subject and moves the real actor into the important subject position, but we still have a formidable four noun combination: "staff information dissemination control." Let's try again:

(2c) The Secretary has effectively controlled how his staff disseminates information.

The crucial actions aren't "be" or "exercise," but "control" and "disseminate."

By applying this one principle--align characters with subjects and actions with verbs--we can improve our writing and, perhaps more importantly, help others improve theirs. You will find that this principle applies to all levels of proficiency--basic to advanced students, colleagues, as well as your own writing.

This one principle does not, of course, constitute a complete set of instructions for clear writing. It deals with prose only at the level of the individual sentence, and does not help you link your sentences into a smooth and coherent flow of information, nor does it help you tailor your prose for a specific audience.

A Little Necessary Obscurity

Of course, there are those occasions when a little obscurity is just what you need, and in these cases those ponderous nominalizations will serve you well. But next time you are puzzling over what exactly is wrong with a text you find difficult to read, just ask yourself "Who is kicking whom?" and you may find that the meaning falls into place.