Clearer sentences—Part 1

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On the recommendation of George Gopen, coauthor of "The Science of Writing Science" (*American Scientist*, 1990), my favorite article on technical writing, I picked up a short text called *STYLE—Toward Clarity and Grace* by Joseph M. Williams. What a find! In his preface Williams writes, "Do not take what we offer here as draconian rules of composition, but rather as diagnostic principles of interpretation. We offer these principles as the basis for questions that allow a writer or editor to anticipate how readers are likely to respond to a piece of prose, a species of knowledge usually unavailable to writers when they unreflectively reread their own writing." This and future columns are rooted in Williams' vade mecum. I have taken many examples directly from Williams.

How would you describe these sentences?

1) Our lack of knowledge about local geology precluded determination of the planner's effectiveness in resource allocation to those areas of investigation with greatest potential.
2) Because we knew nothing about local geology, we could not determine how effectively the planners had allocated resources to investigate areas of greatest potential.

Most would call sentence 2 clearer and more concise. This is because sentence 1 makes us sort out and then reassemble its actions through abstract nouns—*knowledge, determination,* etc. The rearranging distorts the sequence of actions and obscures who does what. In 2, we have converted the abstract nouns into verbs, we've made the actors the subjects of these verbs, and we have rearranged the events into a logical sequence. This is the essence of writing clear sentences.

The storytelling model. From childhood through adulthood we use stories to amuse, to warn, to excite, to inform, to explain, and to persuade. In written form, stories can communicate large amounts of information clearly, quickly, and persuasively—a goal of all technical writing. The success of storytelling is rooted in characters and their actions. To be clear, both stories and technical writing must follow the model: subjects = characters and verbs = their actions.

Consider sentences 1 and 2 according to our model. No characters are visible in 1—the subject of the sentence is *lack*. The action of the sentence is expressed by abstract nouns and the verb is *precluded*. Sentence 1 does not conform to the model, and it is confusing. In sentence 2, the characters of the main sentence and the subordinate clauses are *we* and *planners* which are also the subjects of the sentence and clauses. The actions of the characters are *knew, determine,* and *allocated* which, similarly, are the verbs of the sentence and the clauses. Sentence 2 follows the model and is much clearer.

The difference between 1 and 2 is how the writer tells the story, and where Williams locates his First Two Principles of Clear Writing: "Readers are likely to feel that text is clear and direct when (1) the subjects of sentences name the cast of characters of the text, and (2) the verbs that go with those subjects name the crucial actions of which those characters are part."

These two simple principles give visible guidelines for evaluating your writing. When it feels abstract, complex, confusing, inflated, or pompous, you should locate the cast of characters and the actions they perform (or are the objects of). If you find that those characters are not subjects and their actions are not verbs, rewrite so that they are. Be careful not to assume that the subjects of the sentences are de facto the cast of characters. Determining the cast and actions may require some mental energy, but when you invoke Williams' two principles, there are positive consequences.

Concreteness. When verbs become nouns, thus deleting the characters, sentences become abstract: "There has been an affirmative decision for program termination." Compare with: "The director decided to terminate the program," which is a concrete sentence.

Fewer prepositional phases. Consider the offending words in: "An evaluation of the effectiveness of the software by us will allow determination if it offers an improvement in efficiency to our coworkers." Consider instead: "We will evaluate the software's effectiveness to determine if it can improve our coworkers' efficiency," which eliminates most of the prepositional phrases.

Logical order. Turning verbs into nouns and stringing them through prepositions can confuse the sequence of events: "The closure of the branch and the transfer of its business and nonunionized employees constituted an unfair labor

practice because the purpose of obtaining an economic benefit by means of discouraging unionization motivated the closure and transfer." Following subjects = characters and verbs = their actions, you are more likely to match syntax to the logic of your text. To implement this you may have to invoke the main character, which was left out: "The company committed an unfair labor practice when it closed the branch and transferred its business and nonunionized employees in order to discourage unionization and thereby obtain an economic benefit." The previous sentences exemplify the curse that haunts reviewers and editors—a poorly written sentence that does not have enough information for good revision.

Logical relationships. See if you can connect the dots in: "The more effective presentation of needs by other departments resulted in our failure to acquire funding, despite intensive lobbying efforts on our part." When turning nouns into verbs, you need logical operators such as *because, although,* and *if* to link sequences of clauses: "Although we lobbied intensively, we could not acquire funding because other departments presented their needs more effectively."

Shorter sentences. I will dispense with an example because, ironically, all of Williams's examples are too long. Suffice to say that when subjects and verbs match characters and actions, fewer words are used and sentences are more readable. When longer sentences are required, this allows the information to flow more effectively.

I end Part 1 with a direct quotation from Williams that thoroughly captures the essence of this column. "As we read a sentence, we have to integrate two levels of its structure: one is its predictable grammatical sequence: subject + verb + complement. The other level is its story, a level of meaning whose parts have no fixed order: characters + actions. To a significant degree, we judge a style to be clear or unclear according to how consistently a writer aligns these two levels. We usually feel we are reading texts that are clear, direct, and readable when writers consistently express the crucial actions of their stories in verbs and their central characters (real or abstract) in their subjects. We usually feel that we are reading texts that are gummy, abstract, confusing, and difficult when writers unnecessarily dislocate actions from verbs and (almost by necessity) locate their characters away from subjects or delete them entirely. There are details about these principles worth examining." Part 2 will examine these details.

Blockette. Recently, I presented these concepts as part of a technical writing short course at an oil and gas company. Although the participants agreed about the increased clarity, they were reluctant to adopt the principles. One said they certainly cleaned up the writing and made it easier to understand. "But it did not sound ... ah, well, ah ... pompous ... ah ... or regal enough." He and many of the participants associated scientific or technical value with bombastic style. However, by the end of the course, all were staunch proponents of subjects = characters and verbs = their actions and related concepts to be discussed in the next column. What really convinced them was the clarity that emerged when I revised their writings using these principles. Suddenly they could understand what their coworkers had written! ⅄

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