Revising Style: Telling your Story Clearly: Overview

Judging Style
A First Principle: Stories and Grammar
Subjects and Characters
Verbs, Actions, and "Nominalizations"
Diagnosis and Revision
Who or What Can Be a Character?
Abstractions and Characters
Picking Main Characters
A Second Principle: Old Before New
Choosing Between Active and Passive
A Final Principle: Complexity Last
Introducing Technical Terms
Introducing Complex Information
Introducing What Follows
Split and Polish
Judging Style

Which is 'best'?

1a. Too precise a specification of information-processing requirements incurs a risk of a decision-maker's over- or underestimation, resulting in the inefficient use of costly resources. Too little precision in specifying needed processing capacity gives no indication with respect to the means for the procurement of needed resources.

1b. A person who makes decisions may specify what he needs to process information. He may do so too precisely. He may over- or underestimate the resources that he needs. When he does that, he may use costly resources inefficiently. He may also fail to be precise enough. He may not indicate how others should procure those resources.

1c. When a decision-maker specifies too precisely the resources he needs to process information, he may over- or underestimate them and thereby use costly resources inefficiently. But if he is not precise enough, he may not indicate how those resources should be procured.

Judging Style

Writing may be judged to be “clear or unclear, concise or wordy, direct or indirect”

The authors make a nice distinction between “the felt complexity of (1a) [and] the mature clarity of (1c)”
A First Principle: Stories and Grammar

Book's claim: Focus on “first six or seven words and to the last four or five” and the rest will take care of themselves

Five key grammatical concepts: subject, verb, noun, preposition, and clause

A First Principle: Stories and Grammar

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Subjects and Characters

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Example 1:

a. Locke frequently repeated himself because he did not trust words to name things accurately.

b. The reason for Locke’s frequent repetition lies in his distrust of the accuracy of the naming power of words.

Example 2:

a. If rain forests are continuously stripped to serve short-term economic interests, the entire biosphere may be damaged.

b. The continuous stripping of rain forests in the service of short-term economic interests could result in damage to the entire biosphere.
Subjects and Characters

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Verbs, Actions, and “Nominalizations”

Example 1:
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- B. The reason for Locke's frequent repetition lies in his distrust of the accuracy of the naming power of words.

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A First Principle: Stories and Grammar

Verbs, Actions, and "Nominalizations"

Proposition Clutter:

a. Our development and standardization of an index for the measurement of thought disorders has made possible quantification of response as a function of treatment differences.

b. Now that we have developed and standardized an index to measure thought disorders, we can quantify how patients respond to different treatments.

Grammar:

- Normalizations:
  - develop → development
  - standardize → standardization
  - measure → measurement
  - quantify → quantification
  - respond → response

- Prepositions: 4 of, 1 as, and 1 for

Verbs, Actions, and "Nominalizations"

Normalization suffixes: -ion, -ness, -ment, -ence, -ity (on no suffix)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Nominalization</th>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>Nominalization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>decide</td>
<td>decision</td>
<td>precise</td>
<td>precision</td>
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<td>fail</td>
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<td>resist</td>
<td>resistance</td>
<td>intelligent</td>
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<td>delay</td>
<td>delay</td>
<td>specific</td>
<td>specificity</td>
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When you nominalize:

- Have to add verbs that are less specific
- Make the characters modifiers of nouns or remove them

2 basic principles of a clear style:

- Make your central characters the subjects of your verbs; keep those subjects short, concrete, and specific.
- Use verbs to express crucial actions.
A First Principle: Stories and Grammar

- Subjects and Characters
- Verbs, Actions, and "Nominalizations"

Diagnosis and Revision

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To diagnose:

Underline the first six or seven words of every clause, whether main or subordinate, at the beginning, middle, or end of a sentence.

If those first six or seven words are abstract subjects (not characters), and if the verb is general (e.g., have, do, make, be, etc), that sentence is one you should probably revise.

To revise:

First, locate the characters you want to tell a story about. If you can’t find any, decide who ought to be the main characters.

Next, look for what those characters are doing. If their action is in a nominalization, change it into a verb (i.e., “denominalize” it) and make the character its subject.

Consider using forms: If X, then Y; Because X . . . , Y; Although X, Y; When X, then Y.
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Who or What Can Be a Character?

Characters are abstractions: e.g., stories about demographic changes, social mobility, unemployment, isotherms, magnetism, or gene pools:

  a. When consumers save more, the Federal Reserve adopts a fiscal policy that influences how Congress legislates on taxes.
  b. Increased savings result in a Federal Reserve policy that influences congressional tax legislation.
A First Principle: Stories and Grammar

Who or What Can Be a Character?

In some cases, the nominalizations are familiar to the readers:

Now that we have developed and standardized an index to measure thought disorders, we can quantify how patients respond to different treatments. These measurements indicate that treatments requiring long-term hospitalization do not effectively reduce the number of psychotic episodes among schizophrenic patients.

Which is better?

The hospitalization of patients without appropriate treatment results in the unreliable measurement of outcomes.

When we hospitalize patients but do not treat them appropriately, we cannot measure outcomes reliably.

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A First Principle: Stories and Grammar

Abstractions and Characters

Serious confusions arise from nominalizations having other nominalizations around it.

The argument is this: The cognitive component of intention exhibits a high degree of complexity. Intention is temporally divisible into two: prospective intention and immediate intention. The cognitive function of prospective intention is the representation of a subject’s similar past actions, his current situation, and his course of future actions. That is, the cognitive component of prospective intention is a plan. The cognitive function of immediate intention is the monitoring and guidance of ongoing bodily movement. Taken together, these cognitive mechanisms are highly complex. The folk psychological notion of belief, however, is an attitude that permits limited complexity of content. Thus the cognitive component of intention is something other than folk psychological belief.

My argument is this: The cognitive component of intention is quite complex. Intention is temporally divisible into two kinds: prospective intention and immediate intention. The cognitive function of prospective intention is to represent how a person has acted similarly in the past, his current situation, and how he will act in the future. That is, the cognitive component of prospective intention lets him plan ahead. The cognitive function of immediate intention, on the other hand, lets him monitor and guide his body as he moves it. Taken together, these cognitive mechanisms are too complex to explain in terms of what folk psychology would have us believe.

A First Principle: Stories and Grammar

Abstractions and Characters

“Don’t try to change every nominalization into a verb. Some of your central characters may have to be abstractions. But if they are, avoid nominalizations that you do not need.”
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If rain forests are continuously stripped to serve short-term economic interests, the entire biosphere may be damaged.

The story implies other characters but does not specify them: Who is stripping the forests? Does it matter? Should we focus on them, and who they are?

Consider alternatives:
  a. If developers continue to strip rain forests to serve short-term economic interests, they may damage the entire biosphere.
  b. If loggers continue to strip rain forests to serve short-term economic interests, they may damage the entire biosphere.
  c. If Brazil continues to strip rain forests to serve short-term economic interests, it may damage the entire biosphere.

Which is best? It depends on whom the story should be about.

Whenever possible, put characters in subjects and actions in verbs. But be sure that the character is your central character, if only for that sentence.
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A Second Principle: Old Before New

a. Because the naming power of words was distrusted by Locke, he repeated himself often. Seventeenth-century theories of language, especially Wilkins’s scheme for a universal language involving the creation of countless symbols for countless meanings, had centered on this naming power. A new era in the study of language that focused on the ambiguous relationship between sense and reference begins with Locke’s distrust.
b. Locke often repeated himself because he distrusted the naming power of words. This naming power had been central to seventeenth-century theories of language, especially Wilkins’s scheme for a universal language involving the creation of countless symbols for countless meanings. Locke’s distrust begins a new era in the study of language, one that focused on the ambiguous relationship between sense and reference.

Issue of disjointedness and flow. Consider first 6 - 7 words of each version:
the naming power of words;
seventeenth-century theories of language;
a new era in the study of language.
Locke;
this naming power;
Locke’s distrust [a nominalization, that repeats something from the previous sentence]
A Second Principle: Old Before New

General approach:

Look at the first six or seven words of every sentence. Be certain that each opens with information that your readers will find familiar, easy to understand (usually words used before).

Put close to the ends of your sentences any information that your readers will find new, complex, harder to understand.

Choosing Between Active and Passive

General rule: Consider the subject of discussion

a. If rain forests continue to be stripped to serve short-term economic interests, the entire biosphere may be damaged.

b. If loggers continue to strip rain forests to serve short-term economic interests, they may damage the entire biosphere.

b makes the loggers the main character (fine if the report is about logging and loggers). But if you are telling a story about the gene pool in the Amazon, then the main characters ought to be rain forests and the biosphere (so that sentence should be passive).
Choosing Between Active and Passive

Always passive?

Case 1:
- a. The fluctuations in the current were measured at two-second intervals.
- b. We measured the fluctuations in the current at two-second intervals.

a is preferred because measurements are objective and the point is anyone can make the same measurements with same results.

Case 2:
- a. It is suggested that the fluctuations resulted from the Burnes effect.
- b. We suggest that the fluctuations resulted from the Burnes effect.

b is correct.

The passive is appropriate when authors refer to actions they perform in the laboratory and that others can replicate: measure, record, combine, etc.

When authors refer to actions that only they are entitled to perform — rhetorical actions such as suggest, prove, claim, argue, show, etc. — then the authors are the main characters and so they should be the subjects of active verbs.

A Final Principle: Complexity Last

Three important contexts when complexity is put last:

Introducing Technical Terms

Introducing Complex Information

Introducing What Follows
When introducing technical terms unfamiliar to readers, place the technical term at the end:

a. **Calcium blockers** can control muscle spasms. **Sarcomeres** are the small units of muscle fibers in which these drugs work. Two **filaments**, one thick and one thin, are in each sarcomere. The **proteins actin and myosin** are contained in the thin filament. When actin and myosin interact, your heart contracts.

b. Muscle spasms can be controlled with **calcium blockers**. Calcium blockers work in small units of muscle fibers called **sarcomeres**. Each sarcomere has two **filaments**, one thick and one thin. The thin filament contains two **proteins**, **actin** and **myosin**. When actin and myosin interact, your heart contracts.
A Final Principle: Complexity Last

• Introducing Technical Terms

  Introducing Complex Information

• Introducing What Follows

  When you express a complex bundle of ideas that you have to state in a long phrase or clause, locate that complexity at the end of its sentence, never at the beginning.

  a. There is a second reason historians have concentrated on Darwin rather than Mendel. Hundreds of letters, both personal and scientific, to scores of different recipients, including leading scientific figures, illuminate Darwin's genius. Only ten letters to the botanist Karl Nageli, and a handful to his mother, sister, brother-in-law, and nephew, represent Mendel.

  b. Historians of science have concentrated on Darwin rather than Mendel for a second reason. Darwin's genius is illuminated by hundreds of letters, both personal and scientific, to scores of different recipients, including leading scientific figures. Mendel is represented by only ten letters to the botanist Karl Nageli, and a handful to his mother, sister, brother-in-law, and nephew.
A Final Principle: Complexity Last

• Introducing Technical Terms
• Introducing Complex Information

Introducing What Follows

When you are introducing a paragraph, or even a whole section, construct the first sentence of that paragraph so that the key terms of the paragraph are the last words of that sentence.

16a. The political situation changed, because disputes over succession to the throne caused some sort of palace revolt or popular revolution in seven out of eight reigns of the Romanov line after Peter the Great.

16b. The political situation changed, because after Peter the Great seven out of eight reigns of the Romanov line were plagued by turmoil over disputed succession to the throne.

• The problems began in 1722, when Peter the Great passed a law of succession that terminated the principle of heredity and required the sovereign to appoint a successor. But because many tsars, including Peter, died before they named successors, those who aspired to rule had no authority by appointment, and so their succession was often disputed by lower-level aristocrats. There was turmoil even when successors were appointed.
A Final Principle: Complexity Last

Introducing Technical Terms
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Spit and Polish

Goal: Make prose as readable as possible.

Other principles: sentence length, the right choice of words, concision, etc. But those are issues pertinent to writing of all kinds, and they are addressed by many books.

Still have to correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, and citation form.

Many handbooks address these issues