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:Improving Your Writing Style:
:
:Clarity

Designed by
Duke University's
Writing Studio



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Announcement

- This Power Point slide presentation is not designed to take the place of a group workshop, where you are given handouts and have an opportunity to work with your own writing. It does, however, provide an overview of the topic for those who haven't taken the workshop and a useful refresher for those who have.

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Clarity

clear, direct, concise

VS

unclear, indirect, wordy, confusing,
abstract, dense, complex

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The Three Principles of Clarity

- Express your actions in verbs.
- Choose subjects with character.
- Put your verbs right after your subjects.

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Which is the clearer sentence?

- A. “The cause of our schools’ failure at teaching basic skills is not understanding the influence of cultural background on learning.”
- B. “Our schools have failed to teach basic skills because they do not understand how cultural backgrounds influence the way children learn.”

The Clearer Sentence

- Sentence B is clearer:
 - *Have failed* is an action verb.
 - The subject has character.
 - The verbs are right after the subjects.
 - *Schools* is a stronger subject than *cause*.



Which is the clearest sentence?

- A. “This number provides a comparative measure of the effect of unequal weights on the precision of estimates produced from the final survey respondents.”
- B. “This number comparatively measures how unequal weights affect the precision of estimates produced from the final survey respondents.”
- C. “This number compares the effect of unequal weights on the precision of estimates produced from respondents to the final survey.”



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The Clearest Sentence

- Sentence C is the clearest:
 - A clear action verb directly follows the subject of the sentence.

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Why are sentences unclear?

- Not usually because of technical terminology
- Not usually because of sentence length
- Not usually because of the complexity of the topic

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Sentences are unclear when ...

We have to think about them.

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How many actions?

“This number provides a comparative measure of the effect of unequal weights on the precision of estimates produced from the final survey respondents.”

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How many actions?

“This number provides a comparative measure of the effect of unequal weights on the precision of estimates produced from the final survey respondents.”

6 actions, 2 verbs

5 prepositions

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Action and Clarity

- All sentences express an action.
- All sentences have verbs.
- We expect sentences to express the action in the verb *and not elsewhere*.
- Where the action is distributed in other parts of the sentence, we perceive that sentence as unclear.

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How many actions?

“This component will chiefly involve a description and qualitative evaluation of the study data collection process.”

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How many actions?

- “This component will chiefly involve a description and qualitative evaluation of the study data collection process.”
- 17 words, 6 actions, 1 verb.

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Revision

- This component involves describing and evaluating the study data collection process.
- 11 words, 3 actions, 1 verb

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When is an action not an action?

- When it is a *nominalization*

Nominalizations are noun or adjective forms of verbs (*nominalization* is a nominalization of the verb *to nominalize*).

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Which example is more concrete?

- A. There was an affirmative decision for program expansion.
- B. The Director decided to expand the program.

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Which example is more concise?

- A. A revision of the program will result in increases in our efficiency in the servicing of our customers.
- B. If we revise the program, we can serve our customers more efficiently.

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Which example is more concise?

- A. A **revision** *of* the program will result *in* **increases** *in* our efficiency *in* the **servicing** *of* our customers.
- B. If we **revise** the program, we **can serve** our customers more **efficiently**.

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Which example is more understandable?

- A. “Decisions in regard to administration of medication despite inability of irrational patients appearing in a Trauma Center to provide legal consent rest with the attending physician alone.”
- B. “When patients appear in a Trauma Center and behave so irrationally that they cannot legally consent to treatment, only the attending physician can decide whether to administer medication.”

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Which example is more understandable?

- A. “Decisions (4) in regard to administration (5) of medication despite inability (2) of irrational patients appearing (1) in a Trauma Center to provide legal consent (3) rest with the attending physician alone.”
 - B. “When patients appear (1) in a Trauma Center and behave (2) so irrationally that they cannot legally consent (3) to treatment, only the attending physician can decide (4) whether to administer (5) medication.”
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Which example has clearer logic?

- A. “Our more effective presentation of our study resulted in our success, despite an earlier start by others.”
- B. “Although others started earlier, we succeeded because we presented our study more effectively.”

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Which example has clearer logic?

- A. “Our more effective presentation of our study resulted in our success, despite an earlier start by others.”
- B. “**Although** others started earlier, we succeeded **because** we presented our study more effectively.”

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B wins the day, every time.

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Grammar and Meaning

Subject	Verb
Character	ACTION

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The First Principle of Clarity

- Express your actions in the verbs.

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Clues to Revision

- Avoid excessive nominalization.
- Avoid strings of prepositional phrases.
- Avoid noun strings (for example. “study data collection process”).

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When We Need Nominalization

- Science, for example, frequently nominalizes as it is about naming processes.
- Many technical terms are nominalizations.
- You can't eliminate nominalization entirely, nor should you.

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Is this sentence unclear?

- “Most of the analysis in this area has already been done in the process of preparing this presentation.”

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Is this better?

- “We already performed most of the analysis as we prepared this presentation.”

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What's the difference?

- “Most of the analysis in this area has already been done in the process of preparing this presentation.”
- “We already performed most of the analysis as we prepared this presentation.”

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Grammar and Meaning

Subject	Verb
CHARACTER	ACTION

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Why Character Matters

- The first sentence is about “Most of the analysis.”
- The second sentence is about “We.”
- If that is your intended meaning, the revision is acceptable.

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The First Two Principles of Clarity

- Express your actions in the verbs.
- Put your main characters in the subject.

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Clear and Unclear Characters

- Clear
 - People
 - Institutions
 - Events
- Unclear
 - Abstractions
 - Processes

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Why This Matters

- “After her lecture, I spoke with Prof. Lakin regarding the possibility of a few of us from our program visiting her Center to discuss funding opportunities.”
- Who is funding whom?

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An Abstract Character

- “Therefore, the main comparisons desired consist of 5 specific a priori contrasts from a potential 33 contrasts that measure the main effects and interactions of the 2x3x2 factorial on the three response variables.”

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Sentence Length

- “The increase in the number of occupations being sampled for increases our chances of finding eligible employees in selected establishments which thereby gives the sample selection procedure greater ability to equalize the final weights.”

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Possible Revision

- “By increasing the number of occupations we sample for, we increase our chances of finding eligible employees in selected establishments. This further enables the sample selection procedure to equalize the final weights.”

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Summary:

The Three Principles of Clarity

- Express your actions in verbs.
- Put your characters in subjects.
- Put your verbs right after your subjects.

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Back to Our First Example

- “This number provides a comparative measure of the effect of unequal weights on the precision of estimates produced from the final survey respondents.”

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Possible Revision

- “This number measures how unequal weights affect the precision of estimates the final survey respondents produced.”

∴ Possible Revision Illustrating Three Principles of Clarity

- “This number <character in subject>measures <action in verb, verb right after subject> how unequal weights <character in subject>affect <action in verb, verb right after subject> the precision of estimates the final survey respondents < character in subject> produced <action in verb, verb right after subject>.”

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Interested In A More In-Depth Experience?

- To sign up for a workshop, go to “Schedule An Appointment” and “Workshop/Group Sign Up” on the Writing Studio’s website:
<http://uwp.aas.duke.edu/wstudio/>