

Title of Module: Sentence Clarity: Characters and Actions

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Video 1: Characters and Subjects

Why Are Subjects and Verbs So Important?

Unlike what many other languages consider a well-formed sentence, in English, a sentence requires at least a subject and a verb to exist. These two core constituents are absolutely mandatory as the core of a correct sentence. Another syntactic requirement is for the verb to be in an active tensed form that agrees with the subject. The subject itself is typically a noun or a phrase that stands for a noun. Keeping in mind these strict structural rules particular to English explains why the clarity of an English sentence is so highly dependent on the core Subject-Verb duo. So, even though there are many other factors that can influence the clarity of expression in writing, the focus of this module will be on these two core sentence elements, and how to align these grammatical elements with the “characters” and “actions” of the story you’re telling.

Characters as Subjects

I’ll start with an example that comes from Joseph Williams’ classic book *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*. Let me tell you a story. “Once upon a time, as a walk through the woods was taking place on the part of Little Red Riding Hood, the Wolf’s jump out from behind a tree

occurred, causing her fright.” The story probably sounds familiar, but the sentence sounds pretty awkward. And if I asked you to revise that sentence to make it more clear, you could probably do so without much difficulty. You’d say, “Once upon a time, Little Red Riding Hood was walking through the woods, and the Wolf jumped out from behind a tree and frightened her.” There, that was easy, wasn’t it?

WHO is doing WHAT?

Unfortunately, not all confusing sentences are that easy to fix. Let’s take a look at the first version of the sentence again. If we can figure out *why* we think the revised sentence is better than the original, we can apply those principles to other kinds of sentences. Ask the question: WHO is doing WHAT? If I asked you to identify the main characters of this story, you’d say Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf. And if I asked you what those two characters are doing in this sentence, you’d probably say they are walking and jumping, and maybe frightening.

Find the Verbs

But look at the grammar of the sentence. It’s wordy and confusing, but it isn’t grammatically incorrect, so it does satisfy the core grammatical requirements of having noun phrases as subjects and verbs that agree. So what are the verbs? You might think they’re “walk” and “jump,” but look, they’re not. The verbs in this sentence are “was taking place” and “occurred.” And the simple *subjects* of those verbs are “walk” and “jump”: Little Red’s walk was taking place, the Wolf’s jump occurred. That’s the problem. The specific actions that ought to be the verbs are actually nouns.

Short, Concrete Subjects

The point is, sentences are clearer when the main characters of the story you’re telling are the grammatical subjects, and the actions they take are the verbs. That’s why the sentence “Little Red Riding Hood was walking through the woods, and the Wolf jumped out from behind a tree and frightened her” sounds a lot better to most readers. Main characters don’t always have to be people, but your grammatical subjects should be short, concrete nouns, not long, abstract phrases.

Video 2: Actions as Verbs

You might think that in real life, nobody would write a sentence like the one about Little Red Riding Hood. However, in academic writing, the problems that occur in that sentence are pretty common, partly because of nominalizations. A nominalization is a noun that is created out of a different word form, such as an adjective or a verb. The verb “to evaluate” becomes the noun “evaluation.” The verb “to decide” becomes the noun “decision.” The adjective “persuasive” becomes the noun “persuasion.” The verb “to argue” can be made into a noun as “argument.”

Gerunds such as “arguing” in a phrase like “their loud arguing kept her up at night” are also nominalizations.

Nominalizations

Nominalizations appear frequently in academic writing, partly because academic language often deals with complex and abstract ideas. And nominalizations aren’t always bad. The point is that nominalizations can make sentences harder to understand when the key actions that ought to be the verbs of the sentence get buried in noun form.

Finding Verbs in Nominalizations

Writers are frequently given the advice to choose strong, active verbs and to avoid overusing nonspecific verbs such as “to be” or “to have.” Writers may find this advice confusing, because it’s impossible to avoid those common verbs when writing in English. However, the advice makes more sense when you understand the problem of nominalizations. Consider a sentence such as “It is our requirement that a review of the data be done.” Can you spot the nominalizations? They’re “requirement” and “review.”

Revising for Active Verbs

If you make those nominalizations into verbs, and make people the subjects of those verbs, the sentence becomes “We require that you review the data.” It’s more concise, and it allows you to choose more specific, active verbs instead of “to be.”

Video 3: *Lead Sentences with Clear Subjects and Verbs*

Here’s the key principle: readers of English find sentences easier to understand if there’s a short, concrete subject and a specific verb near the beginning of the sentence or clause. That means you should revise if there’s a long, drawn-out introductory phrase before you get to the main part of the sentence. Similarly, if there is a long phrase separating the subject from its verb, you should revise to put the subject and verb back together. This principle is called “Simplicity Before Complexity.”

Simplicity Before Complexity

Let’s look at these clunky sentences: “The most beloved child of everyone in her village, especially her grandmother, Little Red Riding Hood entered the woods.” And: “Little Red Riding Hood, the most beloved child of everyone in her village, especially her grandmother, entered the woods.” There are two ways we could revise these sentences to improve clarity. If we ask “WHO is doing WHAT?”, we would say that Little Red is entering the woods, of course. We might also notice that the adjective “beloved” is a nominalization that has the verb “to love” in it, and we might decide that the villagers and the grandmother are also main characters, and

loving is their action. That would lead us to revise like this: “Little Red Riding Hood entered the woods. Everyone in her village loved her, especially her grandmother.”

Old Before New

However, sometimes you have to choose between different principles of clarity. Another principle that we should consider is called “Old Before New,” or familiar information before unfamiliar. That means that sentences flow together better if they are linked to words or ideas in the previous sentences. Following this principle, here’s another revision: “Little Red Riding Hood entered the woods. She was the most beloved child of everyone in her village, especially her grandmother.” Even though this sentence uses a “to be” verb and has more words than the first revision, readers may prefer it because both sentences begin with the same character.

List of References:

Turabian, Kate L. *Student’s Guide to Writing College Papers*. 4th edition, revised by Gregory G. Colomb and Joseph M. Williams, University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Williams, Joseph M. and Joseph Bizup. *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*. 5th edition, Pearson, 2014.