

Clarity

Use the traditional sentence structure

Subject —> Verb —> Object

Example: We analyzed the problem.

Do not convert verbs into nouns as demonstrated in the following:

Example: The problem was the object of our analysis.

Other examples:

Poor: The results are indicative that the data are representative of the population.

Better: The results indicate that the data represent the population.

Poor: My suggestion is that our discussion of the issue be done with care.

Better: I suggest that we discuss the issue carefully.

Poor: The agency conducted an investigation into the matter.

Better: The agency investigated the matter.

Poor: There must be thorough preparation of the specimen sections by the laboratory personnel.

Better: The laboratory personnel must prepare the specimen sections thoroughly.

Main point: Subjects may be characters and verbs may be actions. But these are not fixed relationships.

- By turning verbs into nouns, we can move actions into different positions.
- We can move characters into different positions in a sentence, even drop them altogether.
- We can even turn characters into verbs: chair a meeting, pilot a plane, guard a prisoner.

But while writers are free to move these elements of a sentence in an out of different grammatical positions, readers generally prefer sentences whose parts fit those traditional ninth grade school definitions: subjects as characters, actions as verbs. That's the kind of prose that readers call clear and direct.

When you observe these two principles - characters as subjects and actions as verbs - you help your readers in many ways: They have to read fewer words, the words will be concrete, the sequence of actions coherent, and their logical connections clear.

Keys to Writing Clarity

Taken from
Joseph M. Williams, *Style, Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*,
Longman Publishing, New York, 1997.

1. Remember that your readers probably know less than you do about what you are asking them to read, and so you must be clearer than you think you need to be.
2. Write not as grammarians say you must write, but as technical writers you admire actually write.
3. Put your important characters in subjects, then join those subjects to verbs that name their specific actions.
4. Arrange the flow of information in each sentence so that you move readers from information that is to them familiar to information that is new.
5. Begin series of sentences in a unified passage in a consistent way, with words that the reader will think constitutes a reasonably unified set of ideas. Do not begin sentences randomly.
6. Preserve the connections between major grammatical parts: Avoid long subjects; avoid interrupting the connections between subject-verb and verb-object.
7. Keep introductory clauses and phrases short, keep subjects short, create coordinate structures after those short subjects, avoid tacking a clause or phrase of any kind onto another just like it, and especially avoid tacking on a third one.