

Editing for Clarity: Characters and their Actions

A complete sentence may not necessarily be a clear sentence. To achieve clarity, writers must consider the *characters* and their *actions*. *Characters* are people or concrete elements that initiate actions or trigger events, but they may also be abstract (e.g., happiness, freedom). *Actions* describe what characters do or what events they trigger.

Compare the following sentences:

- A) There is fear among students that there will be fewer class sections offered by the university.
- B) Students fear that the university will offer fewer class sections.

While sentence A is a complete sentence, it is not as clear and direct as sentence B. In sentence B, the characters (e.g., *students* and *university*) are the subjects of their clauses; their actions (e.g., *fear* and *will offer*) are the verbs.

Meeting Readers' Expectations

Readers expect subjects of sentences to be characters (or “doers”) and the verbs to be actions. When these expectations are not met, readers may think that the writing is unclear, indirect, or confusing. Therefore, when revising for clarity, check to see if your subjects represent the characters and your verbs represent the corresponding actions. Then, it is more likely that readers will consider your writing clear and direct.

Breaking Down the Steps for Revision

You can follow three simple steps to help you identify unclear or dense sentences and revise for clarity.

Step 1: Diagnose

- Identify the subjects and verbs of the sentence. See if you have to read at least six or seven words before you get to a verb. If so, the reader may have a difficult time following who or what is doing the action.
- Keep an eye out for passive verbs (e.g., *The report was submitted by the committee*) and expletive constructions (e.g., *there are*, *it is*). These downplay the characters as well as actions. (Note: In scientific writing, the passive voice is often used to keep the focus on the experiment and its results rather than on the experimenters.)

Step 2: Analyze

- Figure out who or what the characters are. (Remember, sometimes characters can be abstract nouns.)
- Find the actions that those characters perform.
- Check to see if the characters and actions match the subjects and verbs, respectively.

Step 3: Revise

- Make the characters the subjects and their actions the verbs of the sentence.
- To link parts of sentences, you can use coordinating and subordinating conjunctions.
 - Coordinating conjunctions (e.g., and, but, so, for, nor, or, yet) are used to join words, phrases, and clauses that are equally important.
 - Subordinating conjunctions (e.g., because, if, when, although, while, that, etc.) connect sentence parts that are not of equal importance and help to stress a certain idea.

Applying the Steps for Revision

Let's see how the three-step process can be used to revise the following sentence:

The cause of some businesses' bankruptcy is not knowing how to adapt well to this recession.

Step 1: Diagnose

- The subject is the entire noun phrase *the cause of some businesses' bankruptcy*, and the verb is the phrase *is not knowing*.
- This sentence may need revision because the noun phrase is quite long, causing the reader to have to read seven words before he or she gets to the verb.

Step 2: Analyze

- Although *bankruptcy* is a possible character, *businesses* is a better choice as the subject of the sentence because it is the only concrete element that can initiate actions, which include *going bankrupt* and *not knowing how to adapt to the recession*.
- We can use a chart to display the information we have discovered so far and to compare the subjects and verbs to the characters and actions.

Subject(s)	Verb(s)
the cause	is not knowing
Character(s)	Action(s)
(some) businesses	go bankrupt not know how to adapt

The chart shows that the character and actions are not the subject and verb of the sentence. As previously explained, readers expect subjects of sentences to be characters and the verbs to be their actions. Because these expectations are not met, readers may consider this sentence to be unclear, confusing, or indirect.

Step 3: Revise

- We will make the character (e.g., *businesses*) the subject of the revised sentence.
- When revising, we need to keep the main idea of the original sentence in mind. Also, we need to consider the relationships among the parts of the sentence in order to select

appropriate linking words. For example, the two actions (e.g., *going bankrupt*, *not knowing how to adapt*) are in a cause-and-effect relationship: Not knowing how to adapt is causing some businesses to go bankrupt. Therefore, we will use the subordinating conjunction *because*.

- Here is one possible revision: *Some businesses are going bankrupt because they do not know how to adapt well to this recession.*

Activity

Diagnose the sentences below, identify subjects and verbs, figure out the characters and actions, and rewrite the sentences. You may need to change the sentence structure. The first sentence has been done for you.

1. The intention on the part of the committee is to audit the records.

Subject(s)	Verb(s)
intention	is
Character(s)	Action(s)
committee	intent, audit

The committee intends to audit the records.

2. Seventh and eighth grade level English and math skills are measured by the exit exam.

Subject(s)	Verb(s)
Character(s)	Action(s)

3. A policy of secrecy and cover-up has been pursued by the CIA director and his advisors.

Subject(s)	Verb(s)
Character(s)	Action(s)

4. Recently, it was determined by our family that the purchase of a new car was needed.

Subject(s)	Verb(s)
Character(s)	Action(s)

Answer Key for Activity

Note that answers may vary.

2. The exit exam measures seventh and eighth grade level English and math skills.
3. The CIA director and his advisors have pursued a policy of secrecy and cover-up.
4. Our family recently determined that we need to purchase a new car.

References

Williams, Joseph. *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*. New York: Longman, 2003.