

# MINI LESSON #1: WHAT IS CLARITY ANYWAY?

Developed by the Center for Global Communication and Design  
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How often do we use the words *clear*, *unclear*, *concise*, *dense*, *direct*, or *abstract* to describe writing? How many times have you been told to write for **clarity** and **conciseness**, but you weren't really sure exactly what that means? There are a couple different ways to approach writing more clearly and concisely, but there is one overarching truth that encompasses all types of writing.

All sentences tell stories (yes, even in scientific and technical writing).

For any audience or purpose, there are two principles that help tell stories/write sentences more clearly:

- 1) The main characters are subjects of verbs, or tell "who" is "doing".
- 2) Those verbs express specific actions.

Let's look at a couple examples.

1a. On a cold day in March, as a **walk** through the woods was happening on the part of *Hudson and I*, the **rain** began to fall from the sky, causing us to turn around in order to avoid a mudslide.

1b. On a cold day in March, ***Hudson and I* WERE WALKING** through the woods when it started raining, so **we** TURNED around to avoid a mudslide.

In 1a, the subjects (bolded) are not the characters (italicized). The subjects in 1a do not name the characters; they name actions expressed in verbs-turned-nouns (also called nominalizations, but more on that later). Likewise, the verbs (underlined) are vague.

In 1b, the subjects are now both the subjects and characters (bolded and italicized). In addition, the verbs (capitalized and underlined) are specific actions.

However, the main characters of your sentences might not always be "flesh and blood." They may be *abstractions*, such as *freedom of speech*. *Freedom of speech* is actually TWO nominalizations that are also an abstraction. It's perfectly acceptable (and "correct") to tell stories about abstractions, *including nominalizations*, as long as they are the subjects of your sentences. Things get confusing when there are multiple abstractions in a series of sentences, or if the abstractions you're discussing are not familiar to your reader.

When we encounter writing that is unclear or dense (like 1a), it normally has nothing to do with the *content* of the sentences, but rather the way in which the sentences are *written*. When verbs become nouns, and nouns become verbs, sentences can be unclear and difficult to understand.

Essentially, the main point is this: **Important actions are expressed as verbs.**

When actions (verbs) or descriptions (adjectives) are expressed as *nouns* rather than verbs, it's called a **nominalization**.

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Look at how sentences 2a and 2b express action. In 2a, the actions (bold) are not verbs (capitalized); they are nouns:

2a. Our **lack** of data PREVENTED **evaluation** of the school's **actions** in **targeting** services to students most in **need** of **assistance**.

In 2a, however, almost all actions are verbs:

2b. Because we **LACKED** data, we could not **EVALUATE** whether the school **TARGETED** services to students that most **NEEDED** assistance.

As you can see, 2a is more dense and complicated than 2b. Using actions as verbs creates clear, direct sentences. As Joseph Williams puts it, "No element of style more characterized turgid writing, writing that feels abstract, indirect, and difficult, than lots of nominalizations, especially as the subjects of verbs" (33).

To learn more about how to **revise** sentences that include **nominalizations**, go to Mini Lesson #2.

For an interesting perspective on nominalizations, read this NYTimes piece from [Helen Sword](#).

## Sources & Works Cited

Williams, Joseph M. *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. 10th ed. Longman, 2011.