

MINI LESSON #2: REVISING FOR CLARITY

Developed by the Center for Global Communication and Design
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In Mini Lesson #1, we talked about the importance of ensuring sentences abide by the two most important principles of clear and direct writing:

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

When sentences are written using **nominalizations** and unstrategic **passive voice** (more on that in Mini Lesson #3), the writing can be difficult for your reader (not the content). This is why *revision* is such an important part of the writing process.

The next issue, then, is **how** to revise for clarity. There are several strategies to go about revising sentences. We'll offer two that give a diagnostic and methodical approach to revising those sentences that may seem clear to you but may not be for your readers.

- 1) Use the [Paramedic Method](#). The Paramedic Method was originally developed by Richard Lanham. This method offers concrete steps which will help you identify patterns where nominalizations occur most frequently in your own writing. [The concepts of [Rhetorical Awareness and User-Centered Design](#) are also helpful in understanding the importance of writing clearly and concisely.]
- 2) Use Joseph Williams's “Diagnose, Analyze, Rewrite” strategy. Here's how Williams encourages writers to revise for clarity:
 1. **Diagnose.**
 - a. Underline the first seven or eight words in each sentence (ignoring short introductory phrases).
 - b. Look for two things: 1) Did you underline abstract nouns that are simple subjects? 2) Did you go beyond seven or eight words before you got to a verb?
 2. **Analyze**
 - a. Decide who your main characters are, especially “flesh-and-blood” ones (more about this in Mini Lesson #3).
 - b. Then, look for the actions those characters perform, especially those disguised as **nominalizations** (nouns or adjectives derived from verbs).
 3. **Rewrite.**
 - a. If the actions are **nominalizations**, make them verbs.
 - b. Make the characters the subjects of those verbs.
 - c. REWRITE the sentence with *subordinating conjunctions* like **because, when, if, although, why, how, whether, or that**.

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If you are really stuck in a “revising rut” and/or having difficulty identifying characters and actions, or the first two strategies aren’t helping you, try to write those suspected nominalization-filled sentences in a way that you would explain to someone face-to-face. Sometimes we change the way we explain concepts that are familiar to us when we’re writing by making concepts/ideas sound more complicated/complex. Shifting the **mode** of communication temporarily can help reduce wordiness and make sentences more clear and direct.

Another helpful tip for revising nominalizations is recognizing several patterns of nominalizations (from Williams 35-37):

Pattern 1: The nominalization is the subject of an “empty verb” such as *be*, *seems*, *has*, *etc.*

ORIGINAL: The *intention* of the **committee** IS to audit the records.

REVISED: The committee *intends* to audit the records.

Pattern 2: The nominalization follows an empty verb:

ORIGINAL: The **agency** CONDUCTED an *investigation* into the matter.

REVISED: The **agency** *investigated* the matter.

Pattern 3: One nominalization is the subject of an empty verb and a second nominalization follows it:

ORIGINAL: **Our** *loss* in sales WAS a result of their *expansion* of outlets.

REVISED: **We** *lost* sales because **they** *expanded* outlets.

Pattern 4: A nominalization follows *there is* or *there are*:

ORIGINAL: There IS no *need* for **our** further *study* of this problem.

REVISION: **We** *need* not *study* this problem further.

****NOTE**** Nominalizations like “need” and “study” can disguise themselves well because they do not follow other patterns of nominalization construction (see Pattern 6).

Pattern 5: Two or three nominalizations in a row are joined by prepositions:

ORIGINAL: We DID a *review* of the *evolution* of the brain.

REVISION: **We** *reviewed* the *evolution* of the brain.

We *reviewed* how the brain *evolved*.

****NOTE**** Revision 1 keeps intact the second nominalization, “evolution.” Revision 2 changes it to a verb, “evolved.”

Pattern 6: Phrases using “make” and “take”, gerunds (verb + -ing), and nouns that typically end in *-tion*, *-sion*, *-ence*, *-ment*, and *-ance*, usually have strong verb counterparts.

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Here are some practice sentences to help hone your skills (from wordvice.com). You can find the answer key [here](#).

1. We made an argument not to buy the house.
2. They reached the conclusion that we should run a new cohort study.
3. Our review of the test results will begin tomorrow.
4. The discovery of a new planet by the Frankfurt Observatory excited the scientific community.
5. The failure of the staff to organize the festival properly was a disappointment to us.
6. The undertaking of building the new company was complicated by their lack of experience.

All this talk about clarity and nominalizations leads to Mini Lesson #3, Passive and Active Voice. What you'll find out in Lesson #3 is that most often, heavy nominalization use causes us to write in the *passive* voice. Diagnosing and revising nominalizations can help reduce the use of passive voice that isn't strategic or purposeful.

Sources & Works Cited

"Tip #1: Avoid Nominalizations." Editing Tips 101. www.wordvice.com

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