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
