

Revision 1: Adverbs, Active Verbs, and Nominalization

DUE DATE

This assignment is due in class on Thursday, January 21st, 2016.

TOPIC

The time to begin writing an article is when you have finished it to your satisfaction. By that time you begin to clearly and logically perceive what it is you really want to say.

Mark Twain.

Good writing is brief, clear, and interesting. Almost no writer's first draft, however, possesses those characteristics. We all need to revise. In this exercise and the following three "revision" assignments, you will practice techniques for editing your writing. These techniques are rules-of-thumb; they will often improve your writing, but sometimes they will not. If you remember that the goal of these rules is to make your writing brief, clear, precise, and interesting, then you will be able to identify the circumstances in which the techniques will be successful, and when they will not.

For this assignment, you will create three different documents. To create the first, please print your paper from last week. Then, in different colored pens, please circle, highlight, or underline all instances of the following: (1) adverbs, (2) nominalizations, and (3) sentences in the passive voice. I explain more about these three categories below. You may highlight the relevant words using a word processor, as long as you distinguish among the three categories. Please number each sentence containing a word that you have highlighted or circled.

In the second document, rewrite each numbered sentence from the first document, and eliminate the circled adverbs, nominalizations, and verbs in the passive voice.

Finally, submit an edited version of your first paper. In the edited paper, replace each numbered sentence if you believe the revised sentence is shorter, clearer, more precise, or more interesting. You do not need to replace every numbered sentence, as sometimes your original sentence will be better.

TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

Please submit your marked up paper in class on Thursday, January 21st, 2016. Please submit your revised paper on Canvas in .doc, docx, .pdf or .odt format, and include a complete bibliography with any secondary sources that you have consulted. Your paper should be no longer than 500 words, excluding the bibliography.

ACTIVE VERBS, ADVERBS, AND NOMINALIZATION

Adverbs

Adverbs are words that describe verbs or adjectives. For example, in the sentence, "John ran quickly," the word "quickly" is an adverb; it describes how John ran. Adverbs typically end in "ly," but often, they do not. For example, in the previous sentence, the word "typically" is an adverb describing how adverbs end, and it ends in "ly." In contrast, the word "often," which occurs two sentences ago, is an adverb not ending in "ly."

Your writing can be clarified and shortened by eliminating some adverbs. In particular, you can often eliminate adverbs, which I call *intensifiers*, that serve to strengthen an adjective or verb.

For example, “very,” “extremely,” and “really” are intensifiers. By choosing a “stronger” verb or adjective, you can often eliminate intensifiers. For instance, instead of saying your cake was “very good,” you might say it was “delicious.” Doing so (i) eliminates a word, thereby increasing brevity, and (ii) uses a more descriptive adjective that is a bit more interesting to read. In some cases, eliminating intensifiers also clarifies your writing. If John sprinted, it would be misleading to say “John ran quickly.” Moreover, some adverbs are eliminable because they are redundant.

Example 1: “Research in cognitive psychology suggests that we are sometimes remarkably bad at probabilistic reasoning.” (Lipton 2004, p. 105).

Comments: The above sentence contains two adverbs: “sometimes” and “remarkably.” The adverb “remarkably” is an intensifier. Instead of saying we are “remarkably bad,” Lipton could have said we are “terrible,” or he could have rephrased the sentence and used a more precise adjective like “unreliable.”

Example 2: “This example ... shows that there are statements that are subjectively completely certain ...”

(Feyerabend 2008, p. 33).

Comments: “Completely” is an intensifier, and it is redundant. In the absence of an adverb, the word “certain” typically means “completely certain.” We need adverbs only to weaken statements of certainty (e.g., “He was somewhat certain that φ .”)

Example 3: “This is one member of a truly thorny set of issues” (Batterman 2006, p. 5).

Comments: “Truly” is an intensifier, and it is redundant.

Not all adverbs, however, can be eliminated. Words like “often,” “always,” “rarely,” and “sometimes,” which describe how often an action is performed, are rarely redundant.

Active Verbs

Writers use the passive voice when they want to avoid specifying an actor. Consider, for example, the following two sentences from a rejection letter: “Thank you for applying for the job at our company. The final list of candidates has been selected, and we regret to inform you that you were not chosen.” Who chose the final list of candidates? Who did not choose you for the job? The author does not say. In general, writers often use the passive voice when they want to avoid taking responsibility. No one wants to be responsible for rejecting someone from a job.

Further, scientists frequently use the passive voice to appear objective. The sentence “A new particle was detected” suggests that the existence of a new particular is irrefutable. The sentence “We detected a new particle,” in contrast, invites the reader to ask, “Are *you* sure *you* didn’t make any errors?” Sentences in the active voice are typically (i) clearer because they specify who performed an action, (ii) shorter because they eliminate helping verbs, and (iii) more interesting because they are about people, rather than concepts.

Example 1: “Subjects were asked to compare the lengths of three lines” (Feyerabend 2008, p. 33).

Comments: We can rewrite the sentence as follows: “Psychologists at the University of Copenhagen asked subjects to compare the lengths of three lines.” The original sentence is shorter, but the second is clearer. The second sentence specifies *who* conducted the experiment. If the writer already said who conducted the experiment, then the first sentence would be better according to our criteria, as it is shorter and it would be just as clear as the second.

Example 2: “In short, Relativity is commonly characterized as having spatialized time ...” (Maudlin 2014, p. 5).

Comments: Who characterizes Relativity in the way Maudlin says? Perhaps physicists do. Perhaps philosophers of science do. Perhaps only philosophers of physics do. Eliminating the passive voice would clarify the sentence. For example, if Maudlin is discussing physicists, he could have written, “In short, physicists commonly characterize Relativity as having spatialized time . . .”

To show that that scientists and science journalists use the passive voice all the time, here is the first paragraph of an article from *Nature*

After the deaths of more than 11,000 people, public-health officials declared on 14 January that the spread of Ebola in West Africa has been stopped — at least for now. Officials with the World Health Organization (WHO) said that no new cases have been detected in Liberia since December. Since Sierra Leone and Guinea have already been declared Ebola-free, this officially ends the chain of human transmission in the region that began more than two years ago. (Check Hayden 2016)

Almost none of the of the verbs above are in the active voice. Who or what stopped the spread of Ebola? Who has not detected new cases of Ebola in Liberia? Who declared Sierra Leone and Guinea Ebola-free? By eliminating the passive voice, we can clarify the paragraph and shorten it as follows: “The World Health Organization (WHO) has detected no new cases of Ebola in Liberia since December. Because Sierra Leone and Guinea are already Ebola-free (according to the WHO), this officially ends the chain of human transmission in the region that began more than two years ago.” The resulting sentences are shorter and clearer.

Nominalization

To “nominalize” means to turn a verb, adjective, or adverb into a noun. For example, “diversity” nominalizes the adjective “diverse”; “quickness” nominalizes the adverb “quick,” and “failure” nominalizes the verb “to fail.” In English, you can often nominalize a verb by adding “ion,” as in “imagination,” “construction,” and more. Academic writing is full of “ion” words, and often, they make your writing longer and less interesting. We watch stories, read books, and listen to plays about people, not about abstract concepts. When editing your writing, look for words that end in “ion,” “ment,” “ness,” and “ity”; these words are often nominalized verbs or adjectives. Then ask yourself if you can shorten a sentence by turning a nominalized word back into a verb or adjective.

Example 1: “The plurality of representations and approaches in science is sustained by the complexity of nature, the employment of highly abstract representational models, and the diversity of investigative, representational, and technological goals” (Kellert, Longino, and Waters 2006, p. 15).

Comments: This sentence violates two of the rules of thumb we have discussed. First, it is in the passive voice. Second, it contains many nominalized verbs and adjectives, including “plurality,” “representations,” “complexity,” “employment,” and “diversity.” By avoiding the passive voice, eliminating the nominalized phrase “the employment of,” and changing “diversity” back to “diverse,” we can rewrite the sentence as follows: “Nature’s complexity, abstract representational models, and diverse investigative, representational and technological goals sustain the plurality of representations in science.” The resulting sentence is still verbose, but it’s easier to read.

Example 2: “[Passive voice] . . . when used correctly can generate as much passion and stimulation as the skilled use of the active voice” (Leather 1996).

Comments: The word “stimulation” nominalizes “to stimulate.” The word “impassion” is likely derived from “passion”, but we can likewise change “passion” back into a verb and rephrase the sentence as follows: “Correct use of the passive voice can impassion and stimulate the reader as

much as the skilled use of the active voice.”

REFERENCES

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