Review of Clarity, Part 1

The principles discussed last week—unclear, confusing, and indirect sentences often have the following characteristics:

- the subjects are abstractions (nominalized actions or adjectives) rather than being the major actors (who themselves are hidden as modifiers or objects, or not present at all)

- the verbs are forms of ‘be’, or ‘happened’, or in passive voice, rather than being the major actions (which themselves are hidden as nominalizations or adjectives)

- the subjects and verbs are widely separated

- prepositional phrases abound

To fix them:

1) find the actions and convert them into the verbs of your new sentences

2) find the actors and make them the subjects of your new sentences

3) those steps may break up a single long clause (often containing multiple prepositional phrases) into multiple short clauses; if so, connect them with meaningful conjunctions like ‘because’, ‘although’, and ‘if’.
Exercises

Uglify each of the following by nominalizing the verbs. Notice how you often end up obscuring the actor, inserting meaningless verbs, separating subjects and verbs, and adding prepositional phrases.

1a) The program had EMPHASIZED European history. 
   The emphasis of the program had been on European history.

1b) The department DECIDED to BROADEN the program. 
   A decision was made by the department in favor of broadening the program.

1c) Enrollment INCREASED after they ADDED other concentrations. 
   There was an increase in enrollment after the addition of other concentrations.

1d) Some have ARGUED that carbon dioxide in the atmosphere will ELEVATE global temperature. 
   The argument has been made that carbon dioxide in the atmosphere will cause an elevation of global temperature.

Improve each of the following, using the three steps given in class. In the first few, actions hidden as nominalizations are capitalized and actors hidden as modifiers or objects are italicized.

2a) A papal APPEAL was made to the nations of the world for ASSISTANCE to those facing the threat of African STARVATION. 
   The pope appealed to the nations of the world to assist starving Africans.

2b) The AGREEMENT by the participants on the program was based on the ASSUMPTION that there was a PROMISE of federal funds. 
   The participants agreed on the program because they assumed the federal government had promised funds.
2c) *Our Analysis* of the results of the experiment did not provide an *Explanation* of *its Failure*, due to a lack of precision in *our data collection.* When we analyzed the results of the experiment we could not explain why it failed because we had not collected the data precisely.

2d) [Actions can also be hidden as adjectives.]
   The data are *suggestive* that the principle is *Applicable* in this case. The data *suggest* that the principle *applies* in this case.

2e) [Actors are sometimes not only hidden, but missing entirely. You’ll need to add subjects when you convert these four nominalizations into verbs.]
   There is a *need* for knowledge of the frequency of transplanted organ *rejection* to enable *refinement* of our procedures. We *need* to know how frequently patients *reject* transplanted organs so we may *refine* our procedures.

2f) There is a *need* for an *analysis* of *student library use* to provide a reliable base for the *projection* of *needed* resources. We *need* to analyze how students *use* the library in order to *project* what resources we will need.

[Now, without hints.]
2g) Their performance of the music was marked by great enthusiasm but lacked historical accuracy. They *performed* the music enthusiastically but inaccurately.

2h) There was doubt among the analysts about Israel’s intentions in regard to withdrawal from the West Bank. The analysts doubted whether Israel intended to withdraw from the West Bank.
In the following set, the original sentence is followed by connecting words to help you construct a new sentence.

3a) This article is an examination of the influence of buyers on advertising and of advertising agency response to those influences in the creation of strategies with consumer appeal.

(In..., ...how...and how...when...that...) In this article, we examine how buyers influence advertising and how advertising agencies respond to those influences when they create strategies that appeal to consumers.

3b) Our report of our findings placed stress on the effect of low pay on morale, despite our realization of the constraint on management’s response posed by limited resources.

(When..., ...how..., even though...that...how...) When we reported our findings, we stressed how low pay affected morale, even though we realized that limited resources constrained how management could respond.
clarity, part 2:
When nominalizations are beneficial

1) In a subject that refers to the previous sentence, helping knit the two sentences together:

   These arguments all depend on a single unproven claim.
   This decision can lead to positive outcomes.

2) To replace an awkward “the fact that”:

   Her acknowledgment of the problem impressed me.

   instead of

   The fact that she acknowledged the problem impressed me.

3) For brevity, when it names what would be the object of a verb:

   I accepted her request.

   instead of

   I accepted what she requested.

4) When naming a concept that has itself become a familiar character:

   Few problems have become so divisive as abortion.
   The Equal Rights Amendment was an issue in past elections.
   Taxation without representation was not central to the Revolution.
   We demand that the government repeal the entertainment tax.

   similarly, such abstractions as ‘freedom’, ‘death’, ‘love’, ‘life’
clarity, part 2:
Passive and active voice

Like nominalizations, passive voice tends to make writing impersonal, and render the actors invisible—especially when both nominalizations and passive voice are present. Compare these two:

We investigated why the employment office interviewed so few minority applicants.

An investigation was begun into why so few interviews were done.

Also like nominalizations, however, passive voice has its place; it is actually better than active voice...

1) When who is acting doesn’t matter or isn’t the point:

The president was re-elected with 54 percent of the vote.
Once the design was publicized, it was widely adopted.

instead of

The voters re-elected the president with 54 percent of the vote.
Once those who publicize things publicized the design, others quickly adopted it.

2) When it enables simplifying the subject of a sentence, or better connects the sentence to the preceding one (more on this next week):

This decision was supported by research that demonstrated the soundness of our reasoning and the need for action.

instead of

Research that demonstrated the soundness of our reasoning and the need for action supported this decision.
3) When it helps establish a coherent sequence of sentence subjects, and the point of view you wish to emphasize. Compare these two:

By early 1945, the Allies had essentially defeated the Axis nations; all that remained was a bloody climax. American, French, and British forces had breached German borders and were bombing Germany and Japan around the clock. But they had not yet so devastated either country as to destroy its ability to resist.

By early 1945, the Axis nations had been essentially defeated; all that remained was a bloody climax. German borders had been breached, and both Germany and Japan were being bombed around the clock. Neither country, though, had been so devastated that it could not resist.

Passive voice and first person

Some claim that scholarly writing should avoid first person and rely on the passive voice, in order to sound more “objective.” For example:

Based on the writers’ verbal intelligence, prior knowledge and essay scores, their essays were analyzed for structure and evaluated for richness of concepts. The subjects were then divided into a high- or low-ability group. Half of each group was randomly assigned to a treatment group or to a placebo group.

But first person and active voice are, in fact, regularly used in even the most prestigious journals:

Since the pituitary-adrenal axis is activated during the acute phase response, we have investigated the potential role of… Specifically, we have studied the effects of interleukin-1 on…

Any study of tensions presupposes some acquaintance with certain findings of child psychology. We may begin by inquiring whether… We should next proceed to investigate.
The first few words of several consecutive sentences from an article in *Science*:

> We examine… We compare… We have used… Each has been weighted… We merely take… They are subject… We use… Efron and Morris describe… We observed… We might find…

So the use of first person in scholarly writing is firmly established. On the other hand, it usually appears only in certain places. You probably would not, for instance, find:

> To determine if monokines elicited an adrenal steroidogenic response, *I added* a monocyte-conditioned medium and preparations of…

More likely would be:

> To determine if…preparations of…*were added.*

Why are first person and active voice used in some places and not others? Williams suggests that scholarly authors commonly use them in “metadiscourse” (discourse about discourse—references to the writers’ own thinking and writing, or the readers’ reading and understanding) and rarely in connection with specific actions taken during the research.

Examples of first-person (and second-person) metadiscourse, in active voice:

> *Introductions:* We claim that; I shall show; I begin by; We must define
> *Conclusions:* We have suggested; I have shown; We have not claimed
> *Suggestions to readers:* Consider now; Recall; Imagine

Such metadiscourse is best phrased in first person and active voice; descriptions of specific actions taken while conducting the research may work better in passive voice, without explicit reference to the researcher/author.
clarity, part 2:
Compound Nouns

Watch out for long chains of nouns (used as adjectives):

Early childhood thought disorder misdiagnosis often results from unfamiliarity with recent research literature describing such conditions. This paper is a review of seven recent studies in which are findings of particular relevance to pre-adolescent hyperactivity diagnosis and to treatment modalities involving medication maintenance level evaluation procedures.

You can often fix such passages by reversing the order of the nouns while converting nominalizations to verbs and judiciously adding prepositional phrases:

Physicians misdiagnose disordered thought in young children because...

How would you fix this one?:

Enforcement of new automobile tire durability guidelines must be a Federal Trade Commission responsibility.

The Federal Trade Commission should enforce guidelines for the durability of tires on new automobiles.

Sometimes you need to add a new subject:

Based on training needs assessment reviews and on office site visits, there was the identification of concepts and issues that can be used in our creation of an initial staff questionnaire instrument.

When we visited offices and reviewed assessments of training needs, we identified issues we can use to create an initial questionnaire for the staff.
For next week

read the rest of Lesson Three and all of Four (48-75)

Take one of the previous writings you did for the workshop (or, if you’re sick of those, anything else you’ve previously written) and write two new versions of it: first, make it less readable by maximizing nominalizations; then improve the readability by minimizing nominalizations and also using what we’ve discussed about active/passive, first person, and compound noun phrases.