Characters
1. The CIA feared the president would recommend to Congress that it reduce its budget.

2. The CIA had fears that the president would send a recommendation to Congress that it make a reduction in its budget.

3. The fear of the CIA was that a recommendation from the president to Congress would be for a reduction in its budget.

Which sentence is least clear?
Which sentence is least clear?

1. The CIA feared the president would recommend to Congress that it reduce its budget.

2. The CIA had fears that the president would send a recommendation to Congress that it make a reduction in its budget.

3. The fear of the CIA was that a recommendation from the president to Congress would be for a reduction in its budget.

Why?
1. The CIA feared the president would recommend to Congress that it reduce its budget.

2. The CIA had fears that the president would send a recommendation to Congress that it make a reduction in its budget.

3. The fear of the CIA was that a recommendation from the president to Congress would be for a reduction in its budget.

- **Boldface** indicates CHARACTER
- **Red** indicates SUBJECT
- **Green** indicates VERB
Readers want actions in verbs, but more importantly . . .

Readers want characters as their subjects.
• Readers want actions in verbs, but more importantly . . .

• Readers want characters as their subjects.

1st principle of a clear style:

Make the subjects of most of your verbs

short, specific, and concrete

– the main characters in your story.
To get characters into subjects, you have to know three things:

1. when you haven’t done that
2. if you haven’t, where you should look for characters
3. what you should do when you find them (or don’t)
Governmental intervention in fast changing technologies has led to the distortion of market evolution and interference in new product development.

1. Skim the first seven or eight words:
   Readers want to have characters as the subject of verbs.

2. Find the main characters.
   They may be
   - possessive pronouns attached to nominalizations
   - objects of prepositions

3. Skim the passage for actions involving those characters, particularly actions buried in nominalizations
   Ask Who is doing what?
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- Skim the passage for actions involving those characters, particularly actions buried in nominalizations.

Ask *Who is doing what?*

- **governmental** intervention → *government* intervenes
- distortion → [government] distorts
- **market** evolution → markets evolve
- interference → [government] interferes
- development → [market] develops
Consider this indirect and impersonal sentence

Original:

Governmental intervention in fast changing technologies has led to the distortion of market evolution and interference in new product development.

- To revise, reassemble those new subjects and verbs into a sentence, using conjunctions such as

  *if, although, because, when, why, . . .*

Revision:

When a government intervenes in fast-changing technologies, *it distorts how markets evolve or interferes with their ability to develop new products.*
• Look at your subjects.

• If you do not see your main characters there expressed in a few short, concrete words you have to look for them.

• Characters can be in
  - *objects of prepositions*,
  - *possessive pronouns*, or
  - *adjectives*.

• Once you find them, look for actions they are involved in.

• Make those characters the subjects of verbs naming those actions.
Readers have the biggest problem with sentences devoid of all characters:

*A decision was made in favor of doing a study of the disagreements.*

What does the author mean??

- We decided that I should study why they disagreed.
- I decided that you should study why he disagreed.
This passage has no characters.

Research strategies that look for more than one variable are of more use in understanding factors in psychiatric disorder than strategies based on the assumption that the presence of psychopathology is dependent on a single gene or on strategies in which only biological variable is studied.

To improve the passage’s clarity we can invent characters:

If one/we/researchers are to understand what causes psychiatric disorder, one/we/they should use research strategies that look for more than one variable rather than assume that a single gene is responsible for psychopathology or adopt a strategy in which one/we/they study only one biological variable.
This passage has no characters.

Research strategies that look for more than one variable are of more use in understanding factors in psychiatric disorder than strategies based on the assumption that the presence of psychopathology is dependent on a single gene or on strategies in which only biological variable is studied.

If we avoid both nominalizations and vague pronouns we may slide into the passive:

To understand what makes patients vulnerable to psychiatric disorders, strategies that look for more than one variable should be used rather than strategies in which it is assumed that a gene causes psychopathology or only one biological variable is studied.
If you make abstract nominalizations main characters and subjects, use as few other nominalizations as you can:

**Example**

- **✗** A nominalization is a replacement of a verb by a noun, often resulting in displacement of characters from subjects by nouns.
- **✓** When a nominalization replaces a verb with a noun, it often displaces characters from subjects.
Revise the sentence below.

- Look at the first six or seven words (ignore introductory phrases).
- Then revise so that each has a specific character as subject of a specific verb.
- To revise, you may have to invent characters. Use we, I, or any other word that seems appropriate.

- In recent years, the appearance of new interpretations about the meaning of the discovery of America has led to a reassessment of Columbus’s place in Western history.

- Revision: In recent years, some historians re-interpreted the discovery of America and consequently they reassessed Columbus’s place in Western history.
Revise the sentence below.

- Look at the first six or seven words (ignore introductory phrases).
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- In recent years, the appearance of new interpretations about the meaning of the discovery of America has led to a reassessment of Columbus’s place in Western history.

- **Revision:** In recent years, some *historians* re-interpreted the discovery of America and consequently *they* reassessed Columbus’s place in Western history.
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- Tracing transitions in a well-written article provides help in efforts at improving coherence in writing.

- **Revision:** An **author** can learn to write more coherently if he traces the transitions in a well-written article.
Revise the sentence below.

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- **Tracing transitions in a well-written article provides help in efforts at improving coherence in writing.**

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- To revise, you may have to invent characters. Use we, I, or any other word that seems appropriate.

• With the decline in network television viewing in favor of cable and rental DVDs, awareness is growing at the networks of a need to revise programming.

• Revision: **TV networks** are aware **they** must revise their programming because **the public** are watching network TV less and cable TV and rental DVDs more.
Revise the sentence below.

- Look at the first six or seven words (ignore introductory phrases).
- Then revise so that each has a specific character as subject of a specific verb.
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- **Revision:** TV networks are aware they must revise their programming because the public are watching network TV less and cable TV and rental DVDs more.
The active voice

Put

- the agent or source of an action in the subject
- the goal or receiver of an action in a direct object

Example of the active:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>subject</th>
<th>verb</th>
<th>object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>lost</td>
<td>the money</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

character/agent  action  goal
The passive voice

1. The subject names the goal of the action.

2. A form of **be** precedes a verb in its PAST PARTICIPLE form.

3. The agent or source of the action is in a *by*-phrase or dropped entirely:

Example of the passive:

```
subject    be + verb    propositional phrase
---        ---         ----------------------
The money was lost [by me]
```

goal       action      character/agent
Compare these two sentences

1. We can manage the problem if we control costs.

2. Problem management requires cost control.

Grammatically both are written in the active voice.

But sentence 2 feels passive because

- Its actions - management and control - are not verbs but abstract nominalizations.
- Subject, problem management, is an abstraction.
- Sentence lacks flesh-and-blood characters.
Active/Passive also refers to how a sentence makes you feel

- **Compare these two sentences**
  1. We can manage the problem if we control costs.
  2. Problem management requires cost control.

- Grammatically both are written in the active voice.

- But sentence 2 feels passive because
  - Its actions - **management** and **control** - are not verbs but abstract nominalizations.
  - Subject, **problem management**, is an abstraction.
  - Sentence lacks flesh-and-blood characters.
Choosing between Active and Passive

Must the reader know who is responsible for the action?

If answer is no, use the passive.

- ✓ The president was rumored to have considered resigning.
- ✓ Those who are found guilty can be fined.
- ✓ Valuable records should always be kept in a safe.
Choosing between Active and Passive

Would the active or passive verb help your readers move more smoothly from one sentence to the next?

- In this paragraph the 2nd sentence is in the active voice. 
  
  *We must decide whether to improve education in the sciences alone or to raise the level of education across the whole curriculum. The weight given to industrial competitiveness as opposed to the value we attach to the liberal arts will determine our decision.*

- In this paragraph the 2nd sentence is in the passive voice. 
  
  *We must decide whether to improve education in the sciences alone or to raise the level of education across the whole curriculum. Our decision will be determined by the weight given to industrial competitiveness as opposed to the value we attach to the liberal arts.*

- The passive formulation allows familiar information to start the sentence and the new information to come last.
Choosing between Active and Passive

Would the active or passive verb give readers a more consistent and appropriate point of view?

- End of World War II in Europe from the point of view of the allies – subject; active verb.

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

- ... from the point of view of Germany, better to use passive – subject; passive verb

  By early 1945, Germany had essentially been defeated; all that remained was a bloody climax. Its borders had been breached, and it was being bombed around the clock. It had not been so devastated, however, that it could not resist.

- Take home point: Pick a point of view and stick to it.
Choosing between Active and Passive

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  By early 1945, Germany had essentially been defeated; all that remained was a bloody climax. Its borders had been breached, and it was being bombed around the clock. It had not been so devastated, however, that it could not resist.

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- Take home point: Pick a point of view and stick to it.
Many writers use the passive verb too often, but it has important uses!

Use it when

- You don’t know who did an action, readers don’t care or you don’t want them to know.

- You want to shift long and complex information to the end of its sentence, especially when it is also lets you move to its beginning a chunk of information that is familiar, and therefore easier to understand.

- You want to focus your readers’ attention on one or another character.
In the sentence below, change all the active verbs into passives, and all passives into actives. Is the sentence improved?

- Independence is gained by those on welfare when skills are learned that the marketplace values.

- **Revision:** Welfare recipients gain their independence when they learn skills valued by the marketplace.
In the sentence below, change all the active verbs into passives, and all passives into actives. Is the sentence improved?

- Independence is gained by those on welfare when skills are learned that the marketplace values.

- Revision: Welfare recipients gain their independence when they learn skills valued by the marketplace.
In the sentence below, change all the active verbs into passives, and all passives into actives. Is the sentence improved?

- In this article, it is argued that the Vietnam War was fought to extend influence in Southeast Asia and was not ended until it was made clear that the United states could not defeat North Vietnam unless atomic weapons were used.

- Revision: In this article, we argue the US fought the Vietnam War to extend its influence in Southeast Asia and did not end it until North Vietnam made it clear that it could only be defeated if the US used atomic weapons.
In the sentence below, change all the active verbs into passives, and all passives into actives. Is the sentence improved?

- In this article, it is argued that the Vietnam War was fought to extend influence in Southeast Asia and was not ended until it was made clear that the United states could not defeat North Vietnam unless atomic weapons were used.

- **Revision**: In this article, we argue the US fought the Vietnam War to extend its influence in Southeast Asia and did not end it until North Vietnam made it clear that it could only be defeated if the US used atomic weapons.
One opinion of scholarly writers:

- Do not use a first person subject.

- Need to create an objective point of view.

- End up with writing like this:

  Based on 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.
Another opinion of scholarly writers:

- Okay to use the active voice and the first-person *I* and *we*.

- End up with sentences like this:
  
  - This paper is concerned with two problems. How can *we* best handle in a transformational grammar certain restrictions that . . ., To illustrate, *we* may cite . . ., *we* shall show . . .

  - Since the pituitary-adrenal axis is activated during the acute phase response, *we* have investigated the potential role . . . Specifically, *we* have studied the effects of interleukin-1 . . .
In scholarly writing there are commonly two types of verbs.

- Verbs referring to research activities:
  
  *study, investigate, examine, observe, use.*
  
  Those verbs are usually in the passive voice:
  
  *The subjects were observed …*
  
  Do you agree?

- Verbs referring to the writer’s own writing and thinking:
  
  *cite, show, inquire*
  
  These verbs are often active and in the first person:
  
  *We will show …*
  
  These are examples of what is called **METADISOURSE.**
Metadiscourse - language you use when you refer to yourself, your reader, or your writing:

- your thinking and act of writing:

  *We/I will explain, show, argue, claim, deny, suggest, contrast, add, expand, summarize . . .*

- your readers’ actions:

  *Consider now, as you recall, look at the next example . . .*

- the logic and form of what you have written:

  *first, second; to begin; therefore, however, consequently . . .*
- The verbs in the sentence below are passive, but could maybe be active because they are metadiscourse verbs that would take first-person subjects.
- Revise the passive verbs that should be changed into active verbs.
- Then go through the sentence again and revise nominalizations into verbs where appropriate.

- It is believed that a lack of understanding about the risks of alcohol is a cause of student bingeing.

- **Revision:** We believe students binge drink because they do not understand the risks of alcohol.
- The verbs in the sentence below are passive, but could maybe be active because they are metadiscourse verbs that would take first-person subjects.
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- Then go through the sentence again and revise nominalizations into verbs where appropriate.

• Success in exporting more crude oil for hard currency is suggested here as the cause of the improvements of the Russian economy.

• Revision: We suggest Russia’s economy has improved because it is successfully exporting more crude oil for hard currency.
- The verbs in the sentence below are passive, but could maybe be active because they are metadiscourse verbs that would take first-person subjects.

- Revise the passive verbs that should be changed into active verbs.

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- Success in exporting more crude oil for hard currency is suggested here as the cause of the improvements of the Russian economy.

- Revision: We suggest Russia’s economy has improved because it is successfully exporting more crude oil for hard currency.
- The verbs in the sentence below are active, but some of them should be passive because they are not metadiscourse verbs.
- Revise in other ways that seem appropriate.

- **In Section IV, I argue that the indigenous peoples engaged in overcultivation of the land leading to its exhaustion as a food producing area.**

- **Revision:** In Section IV, I argue that the indigenous peoples overcultivated the land and thereby exhausted it as a food producing area.
The verbs in the sentence below are active, but some of them should be passive because they are not metadiscourse verbs.

- Revise in other ways that seem appropriate.

- In Section IV, I argue that the indigenous peoples engaged in overcultivation of the land leading to its exhaustion as a food producing area.

- **Revision:** In Section IV, I argue that the indigenous peoples overcultivated the land and thereby exhausted it as a food producing area.
The verbs in the sentence below are active, but some of them should be passive because they are not metadiscourse verbs.

Revise in other ways that seem appropriate.

To make an evaluation of changes in the flow rate, I made a comparison of the current rate with the original rate on the basis of figures I had compiled with figures that Jordan had collected.

Revision: To evaluate how the flow rate changed, the current flow rate was compared to the original rate on the basis of figures collected by Jordan.
- The verbs in the sentence below are active, but some of them should be passive because they are not metadiscourse verbs.
- Revise in other ways that seem appropriate.

- To make an evaluation of changes in the flow rate, I made a comparison of the current rate with the original rate on the basis of figures I had compiled with figures that Jordan had collected.

- **Revision:** To evaluate how the flow rate changed, the current flow rate was compared to the original rate on the basis of figures collected by Jordan.
- In the sentence below, change passive verbs into actives only where you think it will improve the sentence.
- If necessary, invent a rhetorical situation to account for your choice of active or passive.

- Your figures were analyzed to determine their accuracy. Results will be announced when it is thought appropriate.

- **Revision:** We analyzed your figures to determine their accuracy. We will announce our results when we think it appropriate.
- In the sentence below, change passive verbs into actives only where you think it will improve the sentence.

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- The author’s impassioned narrative style is abandoned and a cautious treatment of theories of conspiracy is presented. But when the narrative line is picked up again, he invests his prose with the same vigor and force.

- Revision: When the author presents his conspiracy theories, he abandons his impassioned narrative style and adopts a cautious manner. But when he picks up the narrative line again, he invests his prose with the same vigor and force.
- In the sentence below, change passive verbs into actives only where you think it will improve the sentence.
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• The author’s impassioned narrative style is abandoned and a cautious treatment of theories of conspiracy is presented. But when the narrative line is picked up again, he invests his prose with the same vigor and force.

• **Revision:** When the author presents his conspiracy theories, he abandons his impassioned narrative style and adopts a cautious manner. But when he picks up the narrative line again, he invests his prose with the same vigor and force.
- In this sentence, change passives to actives where appropriate and change nominalizations into verbs.
- Invent characters where necessary.

- These directives are written in a style of maximum simplicity as a result of an attempt at more effective communication with employees with limited reading skills.

- Revision: We wrote these directives in a simple style so we could communicate more effectively with employees with limited reading skills.
- In this sentence, change passives to actives where appropriate and change nominalizations into verbs.
- Invent characters where necessary.

- These directives are written in a style of maximum simplicity as a result of an attempt at more effective communication with employees with limited reading skills.

- **Revision**: We wrote these directives in a simple style so we could communicate more effectively with employees with limited reading skills.
The Professional Voice

• The apprentice banker/chemist/biologist must learn not only to think and look like one, but to speak and write like one, as well.

• Too often aspiring professional think they join the club only when they write in the club’s most complex technical language.

• It is an exclusionary style that erodes the trust a civil society depends on, especially in a world where information and expertise are now the means to power and control.
Some research can never be made clear to merely intelligent lay readers – but less often than many researchers think.

**Example:**

Apart from theoretical conceptualization there would appear to be no method of selecting among the indefinite number of varying kinds of factual observation which can be made about a concrete phenomenon or field so that the various descriptive statements about it articulate into a coherent whole, which constitutes an “adequate,” or “determinate” description. Adequacy in description is secured insofar as determinate and verifiable answers can be given to all the scientifically important questions involved. What questions are important is largely determined by the logical structure of the generalized conceptual scheme which implicitly or explicitly, is employed.
Some research can never be made clear to merely intelligent lay readers – but less often than many researchers think.

**Revision for moderately well-educated readers:**

*When scientists lack a theory, they have no way to select from everything they could say about a subject only that which they can fit into a coherent whole that would be “adequate” or “determinate.” Scientists describe something “adequately” only when they can verify answers to questions they think are important, and they decide what questions are important based on their implicit and explicit theories.*
Some research can never be made clear to merely intelligent lay readers – but less often than many researchers think.

**Even more concisely:**

> Whatever you describe, you need a theory to fit its parts into a whole. You need a theory to decide even what questions to ask and to verify their answers.

May have lost some of the original nuances, but everyone will understand this passage. Not true for the original passage.
As a reader or a writer you must understand 3 things about a style that seems complex:

- It may be necessarily complex to express complex ideas precisely.
- It may needlessly complicate simple ideas.
- It may needlessly complicate complex ideas.
• Prose often clearer when “subjects of sentences name characters” and “verbs name actions”.

• If abstract nominalizations are your main characters and subjects, use as few other nominalizations as you can:
  - A nominalization is a replacement of a verb by a noun, often resulting in displacement of characters from subjects by nouns.
  - ✓ When a nominalization replaces a verb with a noun, it often displaces characters from subjects.
• Prose often clearer when “subjects of sentences name characters” and “verbs name actions”.

• If abstract nominalizations are your main characters and subjects, use as few other nominalizations as you can:
  - A nominalization is a replacement of a verb by a noun, often resulting in displacement of characters from subjects by nouns.
  - ✓ When a nominalization replaces a verb with a noun, it often displaces characters from subjects.
• Use passive if the agent of an action is self-evident:
  - The voters reelected the president with 54 percent of the vote.
  - ✓ The president was reelected with 54 percent of the vote.

• Use passive if it lets you replace a long subject with a short one:
  - Research demonstrating the soundness of our reasoning and the need for action supported this decision.
  - ✓ This decision was supported by research demonstrating the soundness of our reasoning and the need for action.

• Use an active verb if it is a metadiscourse verb:
  - The terms of the analysis must be defined.
  - ✓ We must define the terms of the analysis.
• Use passive if the agent of an action is self-evident:
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• Use an active verb if it is a metadiscourse verb:
  - The terms of the analysis must be defined.
  - ✓ We must define the terms of the analysis.
Summing Up

• Use passive if it gives your readers a coherent sequence of subjects:
  - ✓ By early 1945, the Axis nations had been essentially defeated; all that remained was a bloody climax. The 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.

• When possible, rewrite long compound noun phrases:
  - We discussed the board candidate review meeting schedule.
  - ✓ We discussed the schedule of meetings to review candidates for the board.
• Use passive if it gives your readers a coherent sequence of subjects:
  - ✓ By early 1945, the Axis nations had been essentially defeated; all that remained was a bloody climax. The 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.

• When possible, rewrite long compound noun phrases:
  - We discussed the board candidate review meeting schedule.
  - ✓ We discussed the schedule of meetings to review candidates for the board.