

On the Papers

ENSURING READERS KNOW WHAT ACTIONS ARE HAPPENING IN ANY SENTENCE

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A reader will fail to understand what a writer meant by a sentence if the reader cannot perceive what actions are supposed to be taking place therein. But exactly how does a reader go about discerning which words in a sentence are intended to convey those actions? I'll give the relatively simple answer to that question—an answer taught almost nowhere in our educational systems—after giving you a chance to experience it in the following example, which I have explored with thousands of students and clients.

Take a moment to underline the word or words in the following sentence that you think the writer intended you to perceive as actions:

1a. What would be the employee reception accorded the introduction of such a proposal?

In my experience, in a group of 20 people, some will underline no words, while some will underline one word, some two, some three, some four, and some five. From those 20 people, I will

usually get anywhere from 14 to 20 different answers. What a phenomenon: No group of 20 people can come close to agreeing on what is happening in this sentence.

Now do the same task for this revision of that sentence:

1b. How would the employees receive such a proposal?

In a group of 20 people, usually between 15 and 18 will underline only one word—"receive." The others will usually underline two words, one of which is "receive."

Why is there such agreement in this case? It is not because (1b) is shorter than (1a). It is not because (1a) uses a passive verb and (1b) an active. The discussion of these two vexed issues will have to await future articles in this series.

The answer is quite simple: Readers of modern English expect that the action of a sentence will be articulated by its verb. We lean forward to the verb, expecting that it will announce what is going on:

"How would the employees *receive* such a proposal?" When the verb seems to tell us what action is happening, we generally accept that as the truth and proceed from there. If the verb fails to settle that issue, then we have to seek out alternative candidates. But readers tend to hurtle forward toward the end of this sentence—even as they try to locate the missing action. That attempt—to have the mind travel in two directions simultaneously—produces the fuzzy-headed feeling of non-comprehension that we all experience when reading is not easy.

What words do people tend to underline in sentence (1a)? Many underline "would be." Is that an action? I asked the only person who could know for sure—the writer. I had a long conversation with her about this, many years ago. She said she had not intended those words to be an action. Why then do so many people underline them? Because those two words are part of the verb—"would be . . . accorded." We can feel that we are approaching the action, because we know we are engaging with the sentence's verb. We therefore read "would be" with a type of reading energy usually reserved for processing a sentence's action. But if you underlined "would be," you are already out of the ball game: You have failed to perceive the writer's intention. It is not your fault; it is her fault. She signaled to you that "would be" was the action by making it part of the verb. No wonder you stumbled.

Between 60 percent and 70 percent usually underline "accorded." She told me that was wrong: I could dispense with the concept of "accorded" and not disturb her meaning. Why do so many readers lose this interpretive game at this point? Because "accorded" is the previously missing part of the verb. We have been waiting for some time for this second shoe to drop. When it finally drops, most of us are convinced "accorded" must be the action. After all, not only is it the most important part of the verb, but it is the most multi-syllabic and impressive

word in the sentence. Of course it is the action, we think. We are wrong.

Some people underline “proposal,” which is a noun made out of a verb. This is called a nominalization. The writer told me “proposal” is not an intended action.

About 50 percent underline “reception”—another nominalization. The writer told me that was correct. She had tried to convey the action of receiving; but since she used a noun and not a verb to do the job, no more than half of her readers get that message.

So, with great confidence, I revised her sentence and produced sentence (1b). It is shorter than (1a) because I left out yet another nominalization—“introduction.” It was logically unnecessary: How could the employees receive the proposal if it had not already been introduced? She looked at my sentence (1b) and replied

Locate the action you want your reader to perceive in the sentence’s verb.

that, elegant and concise though it may be, it failed to translate adequately her original (1a). “Introduction,” she told me, was one of her two actions. In any group of 20 people, no more than between zero and two are likely to have underlined those two and only those two words. In other words, almost no one ever perceives what she was trying to say.

At this point in our discussion, I realized that I had no idea what sentence (1a) was trying to say, but I could still tell her how to rewrite her sentence so that her meaning would become available to a majority of her readers. All she had to do was to make those two nominalized actions into verbs, and her meaning would float to the surface. Quickly, and with little effort, she produced the following revision,

which clearly articulates what she was trying to say:

1c. How would the employees receive such a proposal if the executive board introduced it at this time?

Two clauses, two verbs, two actions. You can feel the lean forward clearly: “How . . . receive, . . . if . . . introduced?” I had figured out the first clause: It is my sentence (1b). But I missed the second clause entirely. The crux of the matter is the information now located in the sentence’s stress position, its important moment of syntactic closure: “at this time.” It was the timing of the introduction, not its mere existence, that was the key point. (For an explanation of the stress position, see my earlier article in this series—*The Importance of Stress: the Most Important Words in a Sentence*, 38 LITIGATION 22 (Fall 2011)).

My advice to you is conceptually simple, even though it is sometimes difficult to put into practice: Locate the action you want your reader to perceive in the sentence’s verb. Most people will find it there. Not only will they read your sentence correctly, but they will use far less energy in accomplishing that task.

You may recall your high school teacher admonishing you to “use strong verbs and avoid weak verbs.” That was bad advice because of what she meant by “strong” and “weak.” She had a short list of short verbs that she labeled “weak.” That list was headed by the verbs to be, to have, and to occur. She might then have given you 10 much “stronger” verbs of several syllables each and required you to use each in a sentence for Tuesday’s homework.

I am offering you different advice: Use strong verbs and avoid weak verbs. My advice, which sounds exactly the same as hers, is different because of the way I define “strong” and “weak.” No verb is strong or weak by itself, but only

in context. Every verb has meaning. If the meaning of that verb is the action of the sentence in which it exists, I call that a strong verb. The verb “to be,” for example, has a number of meanings—it denotes existence, equality, or characterization. If that is what it does in your sentence, it is strong.

The plaintiff’s argument is fatally flawed because . . .

In that clause, the only act is the labeling of the argument as “fatally flawed.” The verb “is” does an excellent job of labeling.

If the meaning or meanings of a verb have little or nothing to do with the action of the sentence in which it appears, then the verb, I suggest, is weak. A fine example of that is the “would be accorded” of sentence (1a) above.

If you want your readers to be keenly aware of what is going on at all times, make sure the actions you intend them to perceive are articulated by your verbs. If you have a legitimate need to undercut the force of an action because, forcefully stated, it would be impolitic or impolite or downright cruel, then use some other part of speech to water the action down. Not “Dear Madam, we fire you,” but rather the softer “Dear Madam, discontinuation of our employment agreement with you has become necessary because of . . .”

Nominalizations are neither good nor bad in themselves but only in context. When is one of these abstract nouns really destructive of prose? When it usurps the action from the verb. “Reception”; “introduction”; “proposal”: Which of those—or which combination of those—was meant to be the action of the sentence? Only the writer knew for sure. ■