Analyzing Prose
Noun and Verb Styles

When we write, we often focus intently on what we want to say, and not enough on how we should say it. Consequently, our writing lacks strength, and we force the reader to crawl through wordy, limp sentences. To avoid this writing trap, we must understand how sentence construction conceals and reveals meaning.

Note the differences between sentences one and two:

1. After we conducted an examination of the data, we came to the conclusion that rewards have an effect on behavior.

The first sentence exemplifies noun style prose. It is based on nouns (examination, conclusion, effect) and consequently emphasizes stasis. These nouns conceal important actions and follow weak, unnecessary verbs (conducted, came, have) (Lanham 15). Often writers use noun style to try to sound authoritative and important. They reject the simple and direct in favor of the complex and abstract. Invariably they prefer phrases like “airplane delivery [system]” and “precipitation activity” over the words “[bomb]” and “rain” (Price 277). But in order to comprehend noun style prose, the reader must sift through a mass of prepositions, nouns, and weak verbs; she must essentially translate the writing into clear English.

2. After we examined the data, we concluded that rewards affect behavior.

The second sentence exemplifies verb style prose. It is based on verbs (examined, concluded, affect) and emphasizes action (Lanham 15). Writers who use verb style prose value clarity over adoration. And because “sentences seem clearer when their actions are expressed in verbs,” sentence number two is easier to follow (Williams 42).

How can we recognize noun style in our own writing, and how can we change it to verb style?

Look Out For Too Many Nouns And Nominalizations

Noun style relies heavily on nouns, “particularly abstract nouns derived from verbs and adjectives” (Williams 43). We call such nouns nominalizations. In his book entitled Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and
Grace, Joseph M. Williams gives some examples of nominalizations:

Verb —> Nominalization
discover —> discovery
resist —> resistance
react —> reaction

Adjective —> Nominalization
careless —> carelessness
different —> difference
elegant —> elegance

By turning nominalizations back into verbs and adjectives, we help eliminate noun-style prose.

- Exercise 1
Try turning the following nominalizations back into verbs and adjectives:
A) corroboration
B) mastery
C) stupidity

Look Out For Prepositions
Prepositional phrases inundate noun-style prose. The first sentence we examined had three prepositional phrases:
of the data
to the conclusion
on behavior

The verb-style version eliminated those prepositions by adding strong verbs (examined the data; concluded; affected behavior).

- Exercise 2
Eliminate the prepositions in the following sentences by adding strong verbs:
A) John put in a request to his secretary for a new computer.
B) A description of the problem is found in the book White Frost written by Cindy Carr.

Answers (Exercise 1)
A) corroborate B) master C) stupid

Possible Answers (Exercise 2)
A) John asked his secretary to buy a new computer.
B) Cindy Carr describes this problem in her book White Frost.

Work Cited:

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