

Clarity



As you revise your writing, you might encounter sentences that seem awkward, confusing, or unclear. This can be caused by a number of different factors, but often sentence clarity starts with the sentence's subject and verb. Consider the following principles as you strive to write more clearly. If you are still uncertain about the clarity of your prose, invite an outside reader to give you feedback.

Grammar Review

1. A **verb** is the action of a sentence, the stuff that happens.
2. A **subject** is the part of an independent clause which does, effects, or carries out the verb.
3. An **independent clause** is a group of words—including a subject and verb—that makes sense by itself.
4. A **dependent clause** also contains a subject and verb, though it does not make sense alone—it must connect to an independent clause for the sentence to be complete.

Look for the subjects and verbs in the following sentences:

Example: The frog jumped into the water.
 subject verb

The action of this sentence is jumping, and *jumped* is the verb. The frog is the one jumping, so the frog is the subject.

Example: Because the frog jumped really high, she made a big splash in the water.
 subject verb subject verb

The frog and *jumped* function as the subject and verb of a dependent clause. In the independent clause, *made* is the action/verb, and *she* is who did it.

Four Questions

To ensure that your writing uses clear subjects and verbs, ask these four questions:

1. What is the **action** of the sentence? (What's happening?)
2. Is the action the **verb**? If not, change it to match.
3. Who/What is **doing** the action?
4. Is the doer the **subject**? If not, change it to match.

These questions can help you address two primary concerns that might show up in your writing: **passive voice**, and **imprecision**. Both passive voice and imprecision are subjective values, depending on what you want to accomplish in your writing. However, keeping these values and the four questions in mind will allow you to notice the verbs you use and make stylistic choices more consciously.

Active Voice

Active voice is where the subject of the sentence performs the action or the verb. If the subject is not performing the action of the verb, the sentence is in passive voice, and the subject can often be unclear. Converting from passive to active voice provides more clarity and helps orient the reader.

Passive Example: The tree was climbed by the cat.
 subject actor

Active Example: The cat climbed the tree. (The subject *cat* is doing the climbing.)
 subject
 actor

