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 (subject) jumped (verb) into the water.

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 (subject) jumped (verb) really high, she (subject) made (verb) a big splash in the water.

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 (subject) was climbed by the cat. (actor)

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

Specific Verb Choice

Even if your sentence uses the active voice, it may lack a clear, specific verb. This can also be resolved by asking the four questions. Consider these sentences:

Unclear Example: David made an argument that math was better than history. Mary was clearly in disagreement.
verb verb

Notice how even though the subject is the thing doing the verb, the verb itself does not emphasize the main action of the sentence. Rearrange the sentences, keeping *David* and *Mary* as the subject, but using *argue* and *disagree* as the verb.

Example: David argued that math was better than history. Mary clearly disagreed.
verb verb

Pronoun Reference

Even with an active subject and clear verb, sentences can still be unclear because of pronoun reference. Pronouns refer to the nearest noun. If there is more than one noun, it can be unclear which noun the pronoun should be referring to.

Unclear Example: George waved to David when he walked into the classroom.

Did George wave when George walked in the class, or did George wave when David walked into the classroom? To make sentences clear when there are multiple nouns, use the noun instead of the pronoun.

Clear Example: George waved to David when David walked into the classroom.

Another common clarity issue with pronoun reference is with demonstrative pronouns such as *this*, *that*, *those*, and *these*. Just as with other pronouns, demonstrative pronouns can only refer to the noun nearest to them. Often, demonstrative pronouns are used to refer to an entire idea, which can create unclear sentences. Consider this example:

Unclear Example: Some people text, and some people send letters. This makes me mad.

It is unclear whether people texting or people sending letters makes the speaker mad. Instead, it is more clear to specify and only use the demonstrative pronouns to refer to a specific noun.

Clear Example: Some people text, and some people send letters. Texting makes me mad.