

Prose Style: Sentence Clarity

What's up with this sentence?

Once upon a time, as a walk was being taken by Little Red Riding Hood, the Wolf's jump out from behind a tree occurred, causing her a fright.

This sentence has grammatical *subjects* and *verbs*. It is about *characters* and *actions*. But the two pairs of things don't match up!

Once upon a time [prepositional phrase], as **a walk** [subject] **was being taken** [verb] by Little Red Riding Hood, **the Wolf's jump out from behind a tree** [subject] **occurred** [verb], **causing** [verb] her a fright.

Once upon a time [introductory clause], as a **walk** [main action] was being taken by **Little Red Riding Hood** [main character], **the Wolf's** [main character] **jump** [main action] out from behind a tree occurred, causing her a **fright** [main action].

We tend to read sentences with ease when:

1. Grammatical *subjects* concisely express *main characters*.
2. Characters are *flesh-and-blood actors* (i.e. people or animals, or tangible, inanimate things expressed concisely (e.g. "the storm," "cars," or "our research," etc.).
3. Grammatical *verbs* concisely express main *actions* (i.e. actions directly relevant to a sentence's topic).
4. Grammatical subjects and verbs appear as *close together* and as *early* in the sentence as possible.

Let's try this sentence instead:

Once upon a time, **Red Riding Hood** [subject/main character] **was walking** [verb/main action] through the woods when **the Wolf** [subject/main character] **jumped** [verb/main action] out from behind a tree and **frightened** [verb/main action] her.

Strategies for Revision

Step One: Diagnose. Underline the sentence's first seven or eight words, look for abstract nouns, and look for verbs.

Step Two: Analyze. Who or what is the main character or actor? What is the grammatical subject? What is the main action? What is the grammatical verb? Do those two pairs of things match?

Step Three: Edit & Rewrite. Generate a simple noun for the main character. Generate an active verb for the main action. Mine nominalizations for possible actors and actions. Cut whatever is unnecessary. If the sentence implies some unspecified context or action, incorporate them in.

Four Kinds of Speech to Look Out For

These kinds of speech are necessary and useful. But when writers use them to excess or without care, they can impede or indicate a lack of clarity.

- 1) Nominalizations: noun forms of verbs and adjectives

Old: There has been **speculation** by educators as to the role of a good family environment in the **improvement** of educational achievement.

New: Educators **have speculated** about how a good family environment **can improve** educational achievement.

- 2) Passive voice: “to be verb” + past participle (+by...)

Old: Often, financial independence **is gained** when skills that the marketplace **are learned**.

New: When **people gain skills** that the marketplace values, **they typically gain financial independence**.

- 3) Long Noun Phrases: noun + noun + noun, usually including nominalizations & prepositions

Old: The **misdiagnoses of early childhood thought disorder** often results from **unfamiliarity with recent research literature describing such conditions**.

New: **Physicians often misdiagnose** disordered thought in children because **they are unfamiliar** with recent literature on the subject.

- 4) Prepositions: words that indicate relations in time and space, such as of, in, by, for, on, with

Old: A revision **of** the program will result **in** increases **in** our efficiency **in** the servicing **of** clients.

New: If **we revise the program, we can serve** clients more efficiently.