

Style: Sentence Simplicity

“Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be said can be said clearly.” --Ludwig Wittgenstein

Sentences can be simple or complicated. Complicated sentences are more difficult to read, and seem to be preferred by academic **writers** around the world. **Readers**, however, prefer simple sentences, even to explain complicated ideas.

Making a sentence **unreadable**:

1. Jim kicks Bill.
2. Bill is kicked by Jim.
3. Jim directs a kick at Bill.
4. A kick is directed by Bill at Jim.
5. There is a kick being directed by Jim at Bill.
6. There is a kicking situation taking place between Bill and Jim.
7. There is a kicking situation which is taking place between Bill and Jim.
8. It appears that there is a kicking situation being implemented between Bill and Jim.
9. It appears that there is an implementation of a kicking situation taking place between Bill and Jim.

--from Richard Lanham, *Revising Prose*

When you have written a sentence like #9, *try to work backwards to “Jim kicks Bill”* by writing sentences with **characters** and **actions**. According to Joseph Williams, readers consider writing to be clear when it uses **subjects as central characters**, and the subject's **most important actions are expressed as verbs**. This is the primary difference between sentences one and nine above. In the first sentence, Jim is the central character, and he “kicks.” In the last sentence, Jim is not the main character and, because it is not clear who is doing what, it appears that he is not doing anything.

Making a sentence **readable**:

1. Once upon a time, there was Little Red Riding Hood, Grandma, the Woodsman, and Wolf. The end.

(All characters, no action.)

2. Once upon a time, a walk through the woods happened, when a jump out from behind a tree caused fright.

(All action, no characters.)

3. Once upon a time, a walk through the woods by Little Red Riding Hood to Grandma’s house was occurring, when Wolf’s jump out from behind a tree caused fright in her.

Characters and actions, but the characters are not the actors.
Make the characters ACT!

4. Once upon a time, Little Red Riding Hood was walking through the woods to Grandma’s house, when Wolf jumped out from behind a tree and frightened her.

Hooray! In this sentence, the characters act, and the sentence is clear.

--from Joseph Williams, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*