1. **A nominalization that is a short subject that refers to a previous sentence:**

   ✓ **These arguments** all depend on a single unproven claim.

   ✓ **This decision** can lead to positive outcomes.

   These nominalizations link one sentence to another in a cohesive flow, an issue I'll discuss in detail in Lesson 4.

2. **A short nominalization that replaces an awkward *the fact that*:**

   The fact that she **ADMITTED** her guilt impressed me.

   ✓ Her **admission** of her guilt impressed me.

   But then, why not this?

   ✓ *She* **IMPRESSED** me when *she* **ADMITTED** her guilt.

3. **A nominalization that names what would be the object of the verb:**

   I accepted *what she* **REQUESTED** [that is, *She requested **something***].

   ✓ I accepted her **request**.

4. **A nominalization that refers to a concept so familiar that your readers will think of it as a character (more on this in the next lesson):**

   ✓ Few problems have so divided us as **abortion** on **demand**.

   ✓ The Equal Rights **Amendment** was an issue in past **elections**.

   ✓ **Taxation** without **representation** did not spark the American **Revolution**.

   You must develop an eye for distinguishing nominalizations expressing familiar ideas from those that you can revise into verbs:

   There is a **demand** for a **repeal** of the car tax.

   ✓ We **DEMAND** that the government **REPEAL** the car tax.

Lesson

3

Characters

When character is lost, all is lost.
—ANONYMOUS

The Importance of Characters

Readers think sentences are clear and direct when they see key actions in their verbs. Compare (1a) with (1b):

1a. The CIA feared the president would recommend to Congress that it reduce its budget.

1b. The CIA had fears that the president would send a recommendation to Congress that it make a reduction in its budget.

Most readers think (1a) is clearer than (1b), but not much. Now compare (1b) and (1c):

1b. The CIA had fears that the president would send a recommendation to Congress that it make a reduction in its budget.

1c. The fear of the CIA was that a recommendation from the president to Congress would be for a reduction in its budget.

Most readers think that (1c) is much less clear than either (1a) or (1b).

The reason is this: in both (1a) and (1b), important characters (italicized) are short, specific subjects (underlined) of verbs (capitalized):

1a. *The CIA* FEARED *the president* WOULD RECOMMEND to *Congress* that *it* REDUCE *its* budget.

1b. *The CIA* HAD fears that *the president* WOULD SEND a recommendation to *Congress* that *it* MAKE a reduction in *its* budget.

But in (1c), the two simple subjects (underlined) are not concrete characters but abstractions (boldfaced).

1c. The **fear** of *the CIA* WAS that a **recommendation** from the *president* to *Congress* WOULD BE for a **reduction** in *its* budget.

The different verbs in (1a) and (1b) make some difference, but the abstract subjects in (1c) make a bigger one. Even worse, characters can be deleted entirely, like this:

1d. There WAS **fear** that there WOULD BE a **recommendation** for a budget **reduction**.

Who fears? Who recommends? The sentence's context may help readers guess correctly, but if the context is ambiguous, you risk them guessing wrongly.

Here's the point: Readers want actions in verbs, but they want characters as subjects even more. We create a problem for readers when for no good reason we do not name characters in subjects, or worse, delete them entirely. It is important to express actions in verbs, but the *first* principle of a clear style is this: make the subjects of most of your verbs the main characters in your story.

Diagnosis and Revision: Characters

To get characters into subjects, you have to know three things:

1. when your subjects are not characters
2. if they aren't, where you should look for characters
3. what you should do when you find them (or don't)

For example, this sentence feels indirect and impersonal:

> Governmental intervention in fast-changing technologies has led to the distortion of market evolution and interference in new product development.

We can diagnose that sentence:

1. **Underline the first seven or eight words:**

   > Governmental intervention in fast-changing technologies has led to the distortion of market evolution and interference in new product development.

   In those first words, readers want to see characters not just *in* the whole subjects of verbs, as *government* is implied in *governmental*, but *as* their simple subjects. In that example, however, they aren't.

2. **Find the main characters.** They may be possessive pronouns attached to nominalizations, objects of prepositions (particularly *by* and *of*), or only implied. In that sentence, one main character is in the adjective *governmental*; the other, *market*, is in the object of a preposition: *of market evolution*.

3. **Skim the passage for actions involving those characters, particularly actions buried in nominalizations.** Ask *Who is doing what?*

governmental **intervention**	→ ✓	*government* **intervenes**
distortion	→ ✓	*[government]* **distorts**
market **evolution**	→ ✓	*markets* **evolve**
interference	→ ✓	*[government]* **interferes**
development	→ ✓	*[market]* **develops**

To revise, reassemble those new subjects and verbs into a sentence, using conjunctions such as *if, although, because, when, how,* and *why*:

✓ When a *government* **INTERVENES** in fast-changing technologies, *it* **DISTORTS** how *markets* **EVOLVE** and **INTERFERES** with *their* ability to **DEVELOP** new products.

Be aware that just as actions can be in adjectives (*reliable* → *rely*), so can characters:

> Medieval *theological* debates often addressed issues considered trivial by modern *philosophical* thought.

When you find a character implied in an adjective, revise in the same way:

✓ *Medieval theologians* often debated issues that *modern philosophers* consider trivial.

Here's the point: The first step in diagnosing a dense style is to look at your subjects. If you do not see main characters as simple subjects, you have to look for them. They can be in objects of prepositions, in possessive pronouns, or in adjectives. Once you find them, look for actions they are involved in. When you are revising, make those characters the subjects of verbs naming those actions. When you are reading, try to retell the story of the passage in terms of those characters and their actions.

Reconstructing Absent Characters

Readers have the biggest problem with sentences devoid of *all* characters:

> A decision was made in favor of doing a study of the disagreements.

That sentence could mean either of these, and more:

> We decided that I should study why they disagreed.
>
> I decided that you should study why he disagreed.

The writer may know who is doing what, but readers may not and so usually need help.

Sometimes we omit characters to make a general statement:

> Research strategies that look for more than one variable are of more use in understanding factors in psychiatric disorder than strategies based on the assumption that the presence of psychopathology is dependent on a single gene or on strategies in which only one biological variable is studied.

But when we try to revise that into something clearer, we have to invent characters, then decide what to call them. Do we use *one* or *we*, or name a generic "doer"?

✓ If *one/we/you/researchers* are to understand what causes psychiatric disorder, *one/we/you/they* should use research strategies that look for more than one variable rather than assume that a single gene is responsible for psychopathology or adopt a strategy in which *one/we/you/they* study only one biological variable.

To most of us, *one* feels stiff, but *we* may be ambiguous because it can refer just to the writer, to the writer and others but not the reader, to the reader and writer but not others, or to everyone. And if you are not directly naming your reader, *you* is usually inappropriate.

But if you avoid both nominalizations and vague pronouns, you can slide into passive verbs (I'll discuss them in a moment):

> To understand what makes patients vulnerable to psychiatric disorders, strategies that look for more than one variable **SHOULD BE USED** rather than strategies in which it **IS ASSUMED** that a gene causes psychopathology or only one biological variable **IS STUDIED**.

Reintroducing missing characters is a matter in which judgment is important, but in general, opt for the most specific character you can find.

Abstractions as Characters

So far, I've discussed characters as if they had to be flesh-and-blood people. But you can tell stories whose main characters are abstractions, including nominalizations, so long as you make them the subjects of verbs that state specific actions

involving them. We might have solved the problem of the previous example with a different kind of character, the abstraction *study*:

✓ To understand what causes psychiatric disorder, *studies* should look for more than one variable rather than adopt a strategy in which *they* test only one biological variable or assume that a single gene is responsible for a psychopathology.

The term *studies* names a virtual character because we are so familiar with it and because it is the subject of a series of actions: *understand*, *should look*, *adopt*, *test*, and *assume*.

But when you use abstractions as characters, you can create a problem. A story about an abstraction as familiar as *studies* is clear enough, but if you surround an unfamiliar abstract character with a lot of other abstractions, readers may feel that your writing is dense and complex.

For example, few of us are familiar with the terms *prospective* and *immediate intention*, so most of us are likely to struggle with a story about them, especially when they are surrounded by other abstractions (actions are boldfaced; human characters are italicized):

> The **argument** is this. The cognitive component of **intention** exhibits a high degree of **complexity**. **Intention** is temporally **divisible** into two: prospective **intention** and immediate **intention.** The cognitive function of prospective **intention** is the **representation** of a *subject's* similar past **actions**, *his* current situation, and *his* course of future **actions**. That is, the cognitive component of prospective **intention** is a **plan**. The cognitive function of immediate **intention** is the **monitoring** and **guidance** of ongoing bodily **movement**.
>
> —Myles Brand, *Intending and Acting: Toward a Naturalized Action Theory*

We can make that passage clearer if we tell its story from the point of view of flesh-and-blood characters (italicized; actions are boldfaced; verbs are capitalized):

✓ *I* **ARGUE** this about **intention. It** HAS a complex cognitive component of two temporal kinds: prospective and immediate. *We* **USE** prospective **intention** to **REPRESENT** how *we* HAVE **ACTED** in our past and present and how *we* WILL **ACT** in the future. That is, *we* **USE** the cognitive component of prospective **intention** to **HELP** *us* **PLAN.** *We* **USE** immediate **intention** to **MONITOR** and **GUIDE** *our* bodies as *we* **MOVE** them.

But have I made this passage say something that the writer didn't mean? Some argue that any change in form changes meaning. In this case, the writer might offer an opinion, but only his readers could decide whether the two passages have different meanings, because at the end of the day, a passage means only what careful and competent readers think it does.

Here's the point: Most readers want subjects to name flesh-and-blood characters. But often, you must write about abstractions. When you do, turn them into virtual characters by making them the subjects of verbs that tell a story. If readers are familiar with your abstractions, no problem. But when they are not, avoid using lots of other abstract nominalizations around them. When you revise an abstract passage, you may have a problem if the hidden characters are "people in general." Try a general term for whoever is doing the action, such as *researchers*, *social critics*, *one*, and so on. If not, try *we*. But the fact is, unlike many other languages, English has no good solution for naming a generic "doer."

Characters and Passive Verbs

More than any other advice, you probably remember *Write in the active voice, not in the passive*. That's not bad advice, but it has exceptions.

When you write in the active voice, you typically put

- the agent or source of an action in the subject
- the goal or receiver of an action in a direct object:

	subject	verb	object
Active:	I	lost	the money.
	character/agent	action	goal

The passive differs in three ways:

1. The subject names the goal of the action.
2. A form of *be* precedes a verb in its past participle form.
3. The agent or source of the action is in a *by*-phrase or dropped entirely:

	subject	be + verb	prepositional phrase
Passive:	The money	was lost	[by me].
	goal	action	character/agent

The terms *active* and *passive*, however, are ambiguous, because they can refer not only to those two grammatical constructions but also to how those sentences make you *feel*. We call a sentence *passive* if it feels flat, regardless of whether its verb is grammatically in the passive voice. For example, compare these two sentences:

> We can manage problems if we control costs.
>
> Problem management requires cost control.

Grammatically, both sentences are in the active voice, but the second *feels* passive, for three reasons:

- Neither of its actions—*management* and *control*—are verbs; both are nominalizations.
- The subject is *problem management*, an abstraction.
- The sentence lacks flesh-and-blood characters.

To understand why we respond to those two sentences as we do, we have to distinguish the technical, grammatical meanings of *active* and *passive* from their figurative, impressionistic meanings. In what follows, I discuss grammatical passives.

Choosing Between Active and Passive

Some critics of style tell us to avoid the passive everywhere because it adds words and often deletes the agent, the "doer" of the action. But the passive is often the better choice.

To choose between active and passive, you have to answer three questions:

1. **Must your readers know who is responsible for the action?** Often, we don't say who does an action, because we don't know or readers won't care. For example, we naturally choose the passive in these sentences:

   ✓ The president **WAS RUMORED** to have considered resigning.

   ✓ Those who **ARE FOUND** guilty can **BE FINED**.

   ✓ Valuable records should always **BE KEPT** in a safe.

   If we do not know who spread rumors, we cannot say. And no one doubts who finds people guilty, fines them, or should keep records safe, so we don't have to say. So those passives are the right choice.

   Sometimes, of course, writers use the passive when they don't want readers to know who is responsible for an action, especially when it's the writer. For example,

   > Since the test was not completed, the flaw was uncorrected.

   I will discuss the ethics of intended impersonality in Lesson 11.

2. **Would the active or passive verb help your readers move more smoothly from one sentence to the next?** We depend on the beginning of a sentence to give us a context of what we know before we read what's new. A sentence confuses us when it opens with information that is unexpected. For example, in this next passage, the subject of the second sentence gives us new and complex information (boldfaced), before we read familiar information that we recall from the previous sentence (italicized):

   > We must decide whether to improve education in the sciences alone or to raise the level of education across the whole curriculum. **The weight given to industrial competitiveness as opposed to the value we attach to the liberal arts**$_{\text{new information}}$ will determine$_{\text{active verb}}$ *our decision*$_{\text{familiar information}}$.

In the second sentence, the verb *determine* is in the active voice. But we could read the sentence more easily if it were passive, because the passive would put the short, familiar information (*our decision*) first and the newer, more complex information last, the order we prefer:

✓ We must decide whether to improve education in the sciences alone or raise the level of education across the whole curriculum. *Our decision*$_{\text{familiar information}}$ WILL BE DETERMINED$_{\text{passive verb}}$ **by the weight we give to industrial competitiveness as opposed to the value we attach to the liberal arts**$_{\text{new information}}$.

(I discuss where to put old and new information more extensively in the next lesson.)

3. **Would the active or passive give readers a more consistent and appropriate point of view?** The writer of this next passage reports the end of World War II in Europe from the point of view of the Allies. To do so, she uses active verbs to make the Allies a consistent sequence of subjects:

✓ By early 1945, *the Allies* HAD essentially DEFEATED$_{\text{active}}$ Germany; all that remained was a bloody climax. *American, French, British, and Russian forces* HAD BREACHED$_{\text{active}}$ its borders and WERE BOMBING$_{\text{active}}$ it around the clock. But *they* HAD not yet so DEVASTATED$_{\text{active}}$ Germany as to destroy its ability to resist.

Had she wanted to explain history from the point of view of Germany, she would have used passive verbs to make Germany the subject/character:

✓ By early 1945, *Germany* HAD essentially BEEN DEFEATED$_{\text{passive}}$; all that remained was a bloody climax. *Its borders* HAD BEEN BREACHED$_{\text{passive}}$, and *it* WAS BEING BOMBED$_{\text{passive}}$ around the clock. *It* HAD not BEEN SO DEVASTATED$_{\text{passive}}$, however, that *it* could not RESIST.

Some writers switch from one character to another for no apparent reason. Avoid this:

By early 1945, *the Allies* had essentially defeated Germany. *Its borders* had been breached, and *they* were bombing it around the clock. *Germany* was not so devastated, however, that *the Allies* would meet with no resistance. Though *Germany's population* was demoralized, *the Allies* still attacked their cities from the air.

Pick a point of view and stick to it.

Here's the point: Many writers use the passive too often, but it is useful in these contexts:

- You don't know who did an action, readers don't care, or you don't want them to know.
- You want to shift a long bundle of information to the end of a sentence, especially when doing so lets you begin with a shorter chunk of more familiar information.
- You want your readers to focus on a particular character.

The "Objective" Passive versus *I/We*

Some scholarly writers claim that they cannot use a first-person subject because they must create an objective point of view, something like this:

Based on the writers' verbal intelligence, prior knowledge, and essay scores, their essays **were analyzed** for structure and evaluated for richness of concepts. The subjects **were** then **divided** into a high- or low-ability group. Half of each group **was** randomly **assigned** to a treatment group or to a placebo group.

Contrary to that claim, academic and scientific writers use the active voice and the first-person *I* and *we* regularly. These passages come from articles in respected journals:

✓ This paper is concerned with two related problems. Briefly: how can **we** best handle, in a transformational grammar, (i) Restrictions on . . . , To illustrate, **we** may cite . . . , **we** shall show . . .

—P. H. Matthews,
"Problems of Selection in Transformational Grammar,"
Journal of Linguistics

✓ Since the pituitary-adrenal axis is activated during the acute phase response, **we** have investigated the potential role . . . , Specifically, **we** have studied the effects of interleukin-1 . . .

—M. R. N. J. Woloski, et al.
"Corticotropin-Releasing Activity of Monokines,"
Science

Here are the first few words from several consecutive sentences from an article in *Science*, a journal of great prestige:

✓ **We** examine . . . , **We** compare . . . , **We** have used . . . , Each has been weighted . . . , **We** merely take . . . , They are subject . . . , **We** use . . . , Efron and Morris describe . . . , **We** observed . . . , **We** might find . . .

—John P. Gilbert, Bucknam McPeek, and Frederick Mosteller,
"Statistics and Ethics in Surgery and Anesthesia,"
Science

It is not true that academic writers always avoid the first-person *I* or *we*.

Passives, Characters, and Metadiscourse

When academic writers do use the first person, however, they use it in certain ways. Look at the verbs in the passages above. They fall into two groups:

- Some refer to research activities: *examine, observe, measure, record, use*. Those verbs are usually in the passive voice: *The subjects were observed. . . .*
- Others refer not to the subject matter or the research but to the writer's own writing and thinking: *cite, show, inquire*. These verbs are often active and so in the first person: *We will show. . . .* They are examples of what is called *metadiscourse*.

Metadiscourse is language that refers not to the substance of your ideas but to yourself, your reader, or your writing:

- your thinking and act of writing: *We will explain, show, argue, claim, deny, suggest, contrast, add, expand, summarize . . .*
- your readers' actions: *consider now, as you recall, look at the next example . . .*
- the logic and form of what you have written: *first, second, to begin, therefore, however, consequently . . .*

Metadiscourse appears most often in introductions, where writers announce their intentions: *I claim that . . . , I will show . . . , We begin by . . .* , and again at the end, when they summarize: *I have argued . . . , I have shown*. What distinguishes those actions is that only the writer can lay claim to them.

On the other hand, scholarly writers generally *do not* use the first person with verbs that refer to specific actions they performed as part of their research, actions that anyone can perform: *measure, record, examine, observe, use*. Those verbs are usually in the passive voice: *The subjects were observed. . . .* We rarely find passages like this:

> To determine if monokines elicited an adrenal steroidogenic response, **I** ADDED preparations of . . .

Most writers would use a passive verb, *were added*, to name an action that anyone, not just the writer, can perform:

> To determine if monokines elicited a response, **preparations of** . . . WERE ADDED.

A passive sentence like that, however, can create a problem: its writer dangled a modifier. You dangle a modifier when an introductory phrase has an *implied* subject that differs from the *explicit* subject in the following or preceding clause. In that example, the implied subject of the infinitive verb *determine* is *I* or *we: I determine* or *we determine*.

> [So that **I** could] determine if monokines elicited a response, preparations WERE ADDED.

But that *implied* subject, *I*, differs from the *explicit* subject of the clause it introduces—***preparations** were added*. When the two differ, the modifier dangles. Writers of scientific prose use this pattern so often, though, that it has become standard usage in their community.

I might note that this impersonal "scientific" style is a modern development. In his "New Theory of Light and Colors" (1672),

Sir Isaac Newton wrote this charming first-person account of an experiment:

> I procured a triangular glass prism, to try therewith the celebrated phenomena of colours. And for that purpose having darkened my chamber, and made a small hole in my window shuts, to let in a convenient quantity of the sun's light, I placed my prism at his entrance, that it might be thereby refracted to the opposite wall. It was at first a very pleasing diversion to view the vivid and intense colours produced thereby.

Here's the point: Some writers and editors avoid the first person by using the passive everywhere, but deleting an *I* or *we* doesn't make a researcher's thinking more objective. We know that behind those impersonal sentences are still flesh-and-blood people doing, thinking, and writing. In fact, the first-person *I* and *we* are common in scholarly prose when used with verbs that name actions unique to the writer.

Noun + Noun + Noun

One more stylistic choice does not directly involve characters and actions, but I discuss it here because it can distort the match that readers expect between the form of an idea and the grammar of its expression. It is the long compound noun phrase:

> Early *childhood thought disorder misdiagnosis* often results from unfamiliarity with recent *research literature* describing such conditions. This paper is a review of seven recent studies in which are findings of particular relevance to *pre-adolescent hyperactivity diagnosis* and to *treatment modalities* involving *medication maintenance level evaluation procedures*.

It is fine to modify one noun with another, as common phrases such as *stone wall*, *student center*, *space shuttle*, and many others show.

But strings of nouns feel lumpy, so avoid them, especially ones you invent. Revise compound nouns of your own invention, especially when they include nominalizations. Just reverse the order of words and find prepositions to connect them:

1	2	3	4	5
early	childhood	thought	disorder	misdiagnosis
misdiagnose	disordered	thought	in early	childhood
5	4	3	1	2

Reassembled, it looks like this:

> Physicians misdiagnose[5] disordered[4] thought[3] in young[1] children[2] because they are unfamiliar with recent literature on the subject.

If, however, a long compound noun includes a technical term in your field, keep that part of the compound and unpack the rest:

> Physicians misdiagnose[5] **thought disorders**[3,4] in young[1] children[2] because they are unfamiliar with recent literature on the subject.

There is a lesson in this example. Every group of professionals (bankers, engineers, literary critics—it doesn't matter) expects its members to show that they accept its values by adopting its distinctive voice. Too often, though, aspiring professionals try to join the club by writing in its most complex technical language. When they do, they adopt an exclusionary style that erodes the trust a civil society depends on, especially in a world like ours, where information and expertise are the means to power and control. It is true that some research can never be made clear to intelligent lay readers—but less often than many researchers think.