

As you revise your writing, you might encounter sentences which seem awkward, confusing, or unclear. This can be caused by a number of different factors, but oftentimes 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 (**in bold**) and verbs (underlined) in the following examples:

In 1520, **Cortes** conquered the Aztec Empire.

The action of this sentence is conquering, and *conquered* is the verb. Cortes is the one conquering, so Cortes is the subject.

Although Montezuma befriended the Spaniards, **they** nevertheless attacked the city.

Montezuma and *befriended* function as the subject and verb of a dependent clause. In the independent clause, *attacked* is the action/verb, and *they* is who did it.

Four Questions

To ensure that your writing uses clear subjects and verbs, ask these four questions:¹

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.

¹ This model is a reduction of the Paramedic Method designed by Richard Lanham. You can find the complete model here: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/635/01/>

