Clarity

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/
Passive Voice
Passive voice occurs anytime the subject of the sentence is not the thing doing the verb. Grammatically, it occurs when the verb of the sentence combines a variation of the verb to be or to get with a past participle. Consider the following example:

\[ \text{Cortes's} \ \text{hopes} \ \text{to obtain land, gold, and glory were possessed by him.} \]

To revise this sentence, ask the four questions:
1. What is the action of the sentence? \emph{Hoping}.
2. What is the verb? \emph{Possessed}.
3. Who is doing the action? \emph{Cortes}.
4. What is the subject? \emph{Hopes}.

Notice how the example uses passive voice: Cortes’s hopes did not possess gold; the hopes \emph{were possessed} by Cortes. Rearrange the sentence so that \emph{Cortes} is the subject and \emph{hope} is the verb. You should get something like this:

\[ \text{Cortes hoped to obtain land, gold, and glory.} \]

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 this sentence:

\[ \text{Montezuma used gifts of gold and silver discs to welcome the Spaniards to his empire.} \]

Notice how even though the subject is the thing doing the verb, the verb itself does not emphasize the main action of the sentence. The way Montezuma welcomed the Spaniards is less important than what he actually did—welcome the Spaniards. Rearrange the sentence, keeping \emph{Montezuma} as the subject, but using \emph{welcome} as a verb.

\[ \text{Montezuma welcomed the Spanish to his empire with gifts of gold and silver discs.} \]

If you want to emphasize the gift-giving as the action, choose a specific verb to show that action:

\[ \text{Montezuma gave the Spanish gold and silver, welcoming them to his empire.} \]

Here’s another example of an unclear verb:

\[ \text{The Spanish came to Montezuma’s palace and imprisoned him.} \]

\emph{Came}, however, is not the most specific verb you could use to show what the Spaniards did. A more specific verb would be \emph{imprisoned}.

\[ \text{The Spanish imprisoned Montezuma when they came to his palace.} \]

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2 Examples of these verbs include \emph{is, was, are, were, have been, had been, get, got, have gotten, had gotten}, etc.

3 While compositional theory often discourages using passive voice, there are some cases in which passive voice is completely appropriate. Refer to our Passive Voice handout for more information about these distinctions.