

First Person: To use it or not?

Original example: In studying American popular culture of the 1980s, the question of to what degree materialism was a major characteristic of the cultural milieu was explored.

Better example using first person: In our study of American popular culture of the 1980s, we explored the degree to which materialism characterized the cultural milieu.

Original example: As I observed the communication styles of first-year Carolina women, I noticed frequent use of non-verbal cues.

Better example: A study of the communication styles of first-year Carolina women revealed frequent use of non-verbal cues.

Original example: As I was reading this study of medieval village life, I noticed that social class tended to be clearly defined.

Better example: This study of medieval village life reveals that social class tended to be clearly defined.

Original example: I think that Aristotle's ethical arguments are logical and readily applicable to contemporary cases, or at least it seems that way to me.

Better example: Aristotle's ethical arguments are logical and readily applicable to contemporary cases.

Avoiding Second Person

In class we edited the following paragraph to remove first and second person, discussing also pronoun shift, pronoun agreement, and how to come up with more descriptive nouns or noun phrases to replace the vague "you" or "we."

Most people are interested in music, either as a spectator or as performers. You can enjoy music by watching MTV or attending concerts. We can also enjoy playing CDs and listening to music on the radio. Other people want to make their own music. If we are really serious about playing an instrument or singing, we can take lessons and join a band or choir. You might prefer, however, to play for your own enjoyment or to entertain your friends and family at parties. A person has many chances to express his love for music.

Avoiding Clichés

Locate the clichés in the following sentences, and revise the sentences to eliminate them:

1. The disastrous consequences of the war have shaken the small nation to its roots.
2. Prices for food have shot sky high, and citizens have sneaking suspicions that others are making a killing on the black market.
3. Medical supplies are so few and far between that even civilians who are as sick as dogs can't get treatment.
4. With most men fighting or injured or killed, women have had to bite the bullet and bear the men's burden in farming and manufacturing.
5. Last but not least, the war's heavy drain of the nations pocketbook has left the economy in shambles.

Actor & Action

The "actor" and "action" in the following sentence are too far apart to deliver meaning clearly to the reader: A conflict that was greeted at first with much ambivalence by the American public, **the war in Iraq** (*the actor*), which caused a tentativeness that some experts call the "Vietnam syndrome," **sparked protests** (*the action*) among Vietnam veterans.

Notice how the following sentence has been revised for clarity: **The war in Iraq** (*the actor*) **sparked protests** (*the action*) among Vietnam veterans even though the conflict was initially greeted with public ambivalence. Some experts call this tentativeness the "Vietnam syndrome."

Review your draft to determine whether the subjects in your sentences are buried or in the same neighborhood as the verbs that modify them. If not, rewrite to bring the actors up front in your sentences and to close the distance between actors and actions.

The "actor" in the following sentence is completely absent due to its passive construction: It is well known that medieval eating habits were unsavory by contemporary health standards. Cups were shared, forks were never used, and the same knives used to clean under fingernails or to gut a chicken were used to cut and eat meat.

Notice how the following sentence has been revised for clarity: Medieval diners had unsavory eating habits by contemporary health standards. Friends shared cups, never used forks, and they used their knives, the same ones they used to clean under their fingernails or gut a chicken, to cut and eat their meat.

Conduct a “to be” search of your own draft. Whenever you find passive construction, try to put the actor into the sentence.

Eliminating passive voice is only one strategy for giving your writing more energy. Try to use lively verbs as well. Can you replace weak verbs with stronger ones? How about “discovered” instead of “found,” or “seized” instead of “took,” “shattered” instead of “broke.” Review every sentence in the draft and when appropriate revise with a stronger verb.