Specific Nouns and Vivid Verbs

(Word Choice)

Begin your revision by identifying subjects and verbs.

Think of your sentences as short stories about characters who act. Joseph Williams, author of Style, refers to this simple concept as “the first principle of clear writing . . . a principle of style more powerful than any other.” Williams two revision steps: (1) In the subjects of your sentences, name your cast of characters. (2) In the verbs of your sentences, name the crucial actions in which you involve those characters.

THE GUIDE TO THE VERB

Version #1

Verbs have the capacity to give an added vitality to your style— but only if they are wisely chosen. Verbs are capable of giving life to your sentences but are also capable of having a deadening effect on them. There are some verbs that are able to give a sentence the strength and resilience of a bullwhip; there are other verbs that are likely to bring about the sort of sentence that has no more life than is possessed by a piece of string. (84 words)

Version #2: Vivid

Verbs can add great vitality to your style— but only if you choose them wisely. Verbs can enliven your sentences but can just as easily deaden them. The right verbs can give a sentence the strength and resilience of a bullwhip; the wrong verbs can render it as lifeless as a piece of string. (54 words)

1. Replace colorless verbs

Original: We are of the opinion that a salary cut would be completely destructive of morale.

Revised 1: We believe that a salary cut would destroy morale.

Revised 2: A salary cut would destroy morale.

2. Use specific verbs

Original: Mary walked into the restaurant.
How did she walk? That is a general verb. I want a specific verb, so I can visualize it.

Revised: Mary staggered into the restaurant
Mary shuffled into the restaurant.
Mary strutted into the restaurant.
Mary crept into the restaurant.
Mary marched into the restaurant.
Mary tiptoed into the restaurant.
Mary strolled into the restaurant.

THE GUIDE TO THE NOUN

1. Make the noun the doer of the sentence

You want your noun to ACT with power, and not to be acted upon by the verb.

In active voice-constructions, the subject of the verb acts:

**Active:** Wolfe defeated Montcalm on the Plains of Abraham in 1759.

In passive voice constructions, the subject of the verb is acted upon:

**Passive:** Montcalm was defeated by Wolfe on the Plains of Abraham in 1759.

**Active:** Marie Curie won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1911. However, occasional use of the passive voice may focus necessarily on something acted upon:

**Passive:** She was honored [by the Nobel Committee] for her discovery of polonium and radium.

2. Emphasize important words by making them the subjects of your verbs

The **thing** that forced the dictator to resign was the sudden disintegration of the army.

The sudden **disintegration** of the army **forced** the dictator to resign.

3. Be specific

Always use the most specific noun to help the reader visualize.

Original: The dog jumped on top of the car.
Revised: The Saint Bernard jumped on top of the red corvette.

In our sample above with Mary walking into the restaurant, we could be specific by naming the restaurant.

If she stormed into McDonald’s, people might look at her odd for a second, but if she stormed into Olive Garden, people might keep looking over at her the whole night shaking their head. When you get specific with the place, you don’t have to tell the reader why her storming in was or wasn’t a big deal, the place will let us know.

**EXTRA NOTES**

1. **Avoid unnecessary expletives (it is or there is constructions).**

   There is no doubt that there are some teachers in this school who should have gone into a different line of work.

   Undoubtedly, some teachers should have gone into a different line of work.

2. **Use the Right Words, not the Almost-Right Words**

   Some composition and writing experts argue that writers should write with verbs and nouns, avoiding the use of adverbs and adjectives (those words that "modify," or change, verbs and nouns). If you use the right verbs and nouns, there should be no need to modify them into something else.

   Original: Mary walked proudly and confidently down the hall.
   The word walked was not the right word, so the author added proudly and confidently to make it the right word.

   But we have a word that means walked proudly and confidently: strutted.

   Revised: Mary strutted down the hall.

   However, adverbs and adjectives have their place, but be careful to not overuse them. But AVOID using very.

   I was very happy = I was overjoyed.

   I was very scared = I was terrified.