

THE PARAMEDIC METHOD

1. Circle the prepositions.
2. Circle the "is" forms.
3. Ask, "Where's the action?" "Who's kicking who?"
4. Put this "kicking" action in a simple (not compound) active verb.
5. Start fast—no slow windups.
6. Write out each sentence on a blank screen or sheet of paper and mark off its basic rhythmic units with a "/".
7. Mark off sentence lengths in the passage with a big "/" between sentences.
8. Read the passage aloud with emphasis and feeling.

CHAPTER 1

ACTION

Since we all live in a bureaucracy these days, it's not surprising that we end up writing like bureaucrats. Nobody feels comfortable writing simply "Bill loves Marge." The system requires something like "A romantic relationship is ongoing between Bill and Marge." Or "Bill and Marge are currently implementing an interactive romantic relationship." Or still better, "One can easily see that an interactive romantic relationship is currently being fulfilled between Bill and Marge." Ridiculous contrived examples? Here are some real ones.

A businessman denied a loan does not suffer but instead says, "I went through a suffering process." A teacher does not say, "If you use a calculator in class, you will never learn to add and subtract," but instead, "The fact is that the use of the calculator in the classroom is negative for the learning process." An undergraduate wants to say that "Every UCLA freshman needs to learn how to cope with crowds," but it comes out as "There can be little doubt that contending with the problem of overpopulation at UCLA is one thing that every freshman needs to learn how to do." Instead of being invited "to recruit," a corporation is asked "to participate in

the recruitment process.” A university bureaucrat wants to make a generous offer: “To encourage broadband system use, the ACAD will pay all line charges for the next two years.” But instead, it comes out as: “In order to stimulate utilization of the broadband system, it is the intention of the ACAD to provide for central funding of all monthly line charges generated by attachment to the system over the period of the next two years.” A politician “indicates his reluctance to accept the terms on which the proposal was offered” when he might have said “No.” A teacher of business writing tells us not that “People entering business today must learn to speak effectively,” but “One of these factors is the seemingly increasing awareness of the idea that to succeed in business, it is imperative that the young person entering a business career possess definite skill in oral communication.”

All these people write, and maybe even think, in the Official Style. The Official Style comes in many dialects—government, military, social scientific, lab scientific, MBA flapdoodle—but all exhibit the same basic attributes. They all build on the same imbalance, a dominance of nouns and an atrophy of verbs. They enshrine the triumph, worshipped in every bureaucracy, of stasis over action. Real actions lurk furtively in each of the sentences I’ve just quoted—suffer, learn, cope, recruit, pay, speak—but they are swamped by lame “is” verbs, “shun” words (“facilitation,” “intention”), and strings of prepositional phrases.

This basic imbalance between action and inertia is easy to cure, if you want to cure it—and this book’s Paramedic Method tells you how to do it. *But when do you want to cure it?* We all sometimes feel, whatever setting we write in, that we will be penalized for writing in plain English. It will sound too flip. Unserious. Even satirical. In my academic dialect, that of literary study, writing plain English nowadays is tantamount to walking down the hall naked as a jaybird. Public places demand protective coloration; sometimes you must write in the Official Style. And when you do, how do you make sure you are writing a good Official Style—if there is one—rather

than a bad one? What can “good” and “bad” mean when applied to prose in this way?

Revising Prose starts out by teaching you how to revise the Official Style. But after you’ve learned that, we’ll reflect on what such revision is likely to do for you, or to you, in the bureaucratic world of the future—and the future is only going to get more bureaucratic, however many efforts we make to simplify it, and its official language. You ought then to be able to see what “good” and “bad” mean for prose, and what you are doing when you revise it. And that means you will know how to socialize your revisory talents, how to put them, like your sentences, into action.

PREPOSITIONAL-PHRASE STRINGS: SMEARS AND HICCUPS

We can begin with three examples of student prose:

This sentence is in need of an active verb.

Physical satisfaction is the most obvious of the consequences of premarital sex.

In response to the issue of equality for educational and occupational mobility, it is my belief that a system of inequality exists in the school system.

What do they have in common? They have been assembled from strings of prepositional phrases glued together by that all-purpose epoxy “is.” In each case the sentence’s verbal force has been shunted into a noun, and its verbal force has been diluted into “is,” the neutral copulative, the weakest verb in the language. Such sentences project no life, no vigor. They just “are.” And the “is” generates those strings of prepositional phrases fore and aft. It’s so easy to fix. Look for the real action. Ask yourself, who’s kicking who? (Yes, I know, it should be

whom, but doesn't *whom* sound stilted? In this book, we'll stick with *who*.)

In "This sentence is in need of an active verb," the action obviously lies in "need." And so, "This sentence needs an active verb." The needless prepositional phrase "in need of" simply disappears once we realize who's kicking who. The sentence, animated by a real verb, comes alive, and in six words instead of nine.

Where's the action in "physical satisfaction is the most obvious of the consequences of premarital sex"? Buried down there in "satisfaction." But just asking the question reveals other problems. Satisfaction isn't a consequence of premarital sex, in the same way that, say, pregnancy is. And, as generations of both sexes will attest, sex, premarital or otherwise, does not always satisfy. Beyond all this, the contrast between the clinical phrasing of the sentence, with its lifeless "is" verb, and the life-giving power of lust in action makes the sentence seem almost funny. Excavating the action from "satisfaction" yields "Premarital sex satisfies! Obviously!" This gives us a Lard Factor of 66% and a comedy factor even higher. (You find the Lard Factor by dividing the difference between the number of words in the original and the revision by the number of words in the original. In this case, $12 - 4 = 8$; $8 \div 12 = 67\%$. If you've not paid attention to your own writing before, think of a Lard Factor (LF) of one-third to one-half as normal and don't stop revising until you've removed it. The comedy factor in prose revision, though often equally great, does not lend itself to numerical calculation.)

But how else do we revise here? "Premarital sex is fun, obviously" may be a little better, but we remain in thrall to "is." And the frequent falsity of the observation stands out yet more. Revision has exposed the empty thinking. The writer makes it even worse by continuing, "Some degree of physical satisfaction is present in almost all coitus." Add it all together and we get something like, "People usually enjoy premarital sex" (LF 58%). At its worst, academic prose makes us laugh by describing ordinary reality in extraordinary language.

Now for the third example.

In response to the issue of equality for educational and occupational mobility, it is my belief that a system of gender inequality exists in the school system.

A diagram reveals the problem and points to a lurking action:

In response
to the issue
of equality
for educational and occupational mobility,
it *is* my belief that a system
of gender inequality exists
in the school system.

A string of prepositional phrases, then a form of the verb "to be" (usually "is"), then more prepositional phrases. But sandwiched in the middle lurks, furtive and afraid, the real *action* of the sentence: "it is my belief that." Change that from the "is" form to the active voice, and we have *an action*. Somebody *believes* something. Everything before and after this action amounts to a single phrase—"gender inequality." So we have this revision:

I believe that gender inequality exists in the schools. (9 words instead of 26; LF 65%)

The drill for this problem stands clear. Circle every form of "to be" (*is, was, will be, seems to be, have been*) and every prepositional phrase (*of, in, by, through, from, etc.*). Then find out who's kicking who and start rebuilding the sentence with that action. Two prepositional phrases in a row turn on the warning light, three make a problem, and four demand immediate surgery. Look for the real *action* hidden behind the "is" and prepositional phrases. So here:

Original

The history of new regulatory provisions is that there is generally an immediate resistance to them.

What hides behind “is that there is”? *Resistance*. And behind that? *Resist!* Now we need an *actor*. We have to invent one, but clearly “people in general” are acting here. So:

Revision

People usually resist new regulations.

Five words instead of 16, for a LF of 69%. The two original prepositional phrases have been eliminated. The action—*resist*—stands clear. A little practice in this kind of revision and, instead of writing “There are many ways in which people resist change,” you’ll say “People resist change in many ways.”

The action lies in an even deeper grave of prepositions in this example:

The project is likely to result in a minor population increase in the City from families relocating to the site from outside the community.

Chart first:

The project
is likely
to result
in a minor population increase
in the City
from families relocating
to the site
from outside the community.

The classic Official Style formula: an “is,” an infinitive “to” phrase, then five prepositional phrases in a row. For once, we

have a clear actor—“The project.” We’ll start there. What is the project *doing*? What verb would express “a minor population increase from outside the City to inside the City”? How about “attract”? What is being “attracted”? Families. It all falls into place.

Revision

The project will probably attract new families to the city.

Good work: (1) 24 words cut down to 10, for a Lard Factor of 58%; (2) five prepositional phrases and one infinitive phrase shrunk to one prepositional phrase; (3) above all, a clearly defined *action*—“attract.”

Sometimes people go to grotesque lengths to hide the action from their readers. Look here at an undergraduate disqualifying him or herself from membership in a creative writing class: “The type of writing that I have an interest in is in the area of creative writing.” To get into the class, write instead, “I want to study creative writing” (17 words into 6; LF 66%). Or take this simple example:

Original

There are several examples of this selection process present in the Listerine ad.

Revision

The Listerine ad exemplifies this selection process.

Sometimes potential actions are smeared across the whole sentence. Here’s a favorite of mine:

These are disturbed habitats (e.g. roadsides, vacant lots) vegetated by weedy colonizing species which depend on repeated disturbances for their existence.