Effective Sentences: Agent-Action Prose, Passive Sentences, and Dummy Subjects.
Strong vs weak verbs, and Flow.
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Understanding these concepts can really make a difference in your writing. Consider this sentence.

It was thought to have been said that the sandwich was eaten by the penguin.

Now consider this one:

Joe thought that Sam said that the penguin ate the sandwich.

Both sentences have roughly the same meaning, that is, they describe the same event; but which is easier to understand? Which is more precise, less vague?

The first sentence has two features that the second does not: passive constructions (*to have been said*; *was eaten*) and a dummy subject (*it*). The second sentence uses the active voice and no dummy subjects. That means *it makes subjects the agents of actions*. Let's look at these features and see what they are, and how to make better sentences.

Note this sentence, which is in the active voice.

       The penguin ate the sandwich.
           S(a)   V   O

This sentence contains a Subject, a Verb, and an Object. It is an SVO sentence. SVO is the normal syntactical order of English sentences. The (a) means "agent-action." Keep that in mind. Now let's make sure we know what a subject is. We can identify the Subject of a sentence in two ways: 1) it governs the form of the verb (meaning that it determines the agreement between Subject and Verb); 2) the Subject "acts" in a sentence (meaning, it performs an action). In other words, a Subject is the agent of an action; it is what performs an action (directed toward an Object). In this sentence, the subject, *the penguin,* both governs the verb and performs the action (a). When this happens, we have a very good sentence--or more precisely, a very *normal* sentence, which is what makes it easier to understand.

Now, consider this sentence:

The sandwich was eaten by the penguin.
       S   V   O(a)

This sentence is in the passive voice. One way to identify the passive voice is to look for a past tense form of "to be" (in this case *was*) followed by a past participle verb (*eaten*) followed by a preposition (usually *by*) then a noun phrase (*the penguin*).

Now, note that the syntactical order of this passive sentence is still SVO. But something is very different. The Subject of the sentence is now *the sandwich*. We know this because, remember, it governs the verb (*the sandwich was eaten; the sandwiches were eaten)*. Now here's the key: *the penguin*, which, in the active sentence was the Subject and performed the action, is now in the Object position of the sentence: O(a). In other words, the agent has become a passive object, and the object has become the Subject. This is odd, because objects normally do not perform actions; agents do. This is also uncomfortable because the passive construction disturbs the normal order of English sentences (by switching Subject and Object and displacing the agent), which is why passive sentences are generally harder to understand.[1]

Let's look at a slightly different example: a passive sentence in which the agent is entirely missing from the sentence.

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[1] Technically, in the passive sentence above *the sandwich* is called the "grammatical subject" and *the penguin* is the "logical subject," to distinguish two types of Subject. This highlights the fact that we tend to think of the subject as that which performs the action, regardless of whether it governs the verb.

The potatoes have been smashed.

Who smashed the potatoes? The sentence is vague because some key information is missing, namely the agent. So, let's find out who performed the action and so we can put that information in the sentence. Of course! *The penguin smashed the potatoes.* Now the sentence is much less vague.

Passive sentences are a favorite device of bureaucrats and politicians, because they deflect responsibility and promise little. *It has been said that the new hiring policy will become effective soon.* Well, who said so? Probably the persons in charge who are embarrassed by the delay, and don't wish to be identified.

Who is "it"?

This brings up another issue related to passives: dummy subjects (no, I don't mean politicians). A dummy subject is a word, usually "it," that stands in place of a subject. It is used when you want to be impersonal and remove the Subject-agent from the sentence, or when the agent is not identifiable. Such sentences are vague precisely because they hide something, namely, the doer of the deed, or a living agent. This sentence has a dummy subject, as well as a passive construction:

It is uncertain that the new budget will pass.

Well, *who* is uncertain that *who* will not pass the budget?

Better: *Senator Newt Salamander is uncertain that Congress will pass the new budget.* Here, *Newt Salamander* replaces the dummy subject, and *Congress* is the Subject-agent of the passive *that* clause.

Before you stop using passive sentences though, keep in mind that sometimes you need them. You can use the passive voice when you have a good reason, like when you want to avoid telling your father you wrecked his car. *Dad, your car was wrecked.* But son, where's the agent in your sentence! You should also use a dummy subject or a passive construction when you don't actually know who the agents or subjects are, or when they are in fact not specifiable, or when specification is not appropriate. For example, *It seems that the car has been wrecked,* may be used when you are uncertain whether the car was in fact wrecked, or who wrecked it. Also—*Gasoline is normally contained in large tanks.* It would be unnecessarily awkward to say: *Humans normally store gasoline in large tanks.*

So, here are some rules to keep in mind for keeping agents in sentences:
1) Always try to make the agent of your sentence the subject, unless you have a good reason not to.
2) When possible, identify a living being as the Agent who performs the action in a sentence, as in the above Salamander example.

Bonus question! Solve this puzzle and win the Nobel Prize in Linguistics: Remove the dummy subject in this sentence without making it awkward: *It is raining.*

Other fun stuff: Strong and Weak Verbs

Eliminating weak verbs is a good way to improve precision, clarity, descriptiveness, and to add liveliness to your prose. Improve your *diction*, as the curmudgeonly grammarians say. Here's how:

Weak verbs are weak because they don't tell us very much, and we use them all the time. In fact they're the most common and overworked verbs in English. They are forms of *to be, to have, to*

get, to exist, as well as the existential *there is/are*. These are also known as dead verbs because they just sit there, dead. Consider these sentences.
*The penguin **is** on the porch*
*The platypus **got** the cheese.*
*The porcupine **has** the flu .*
***There are** too many animals around here.*
Such verbs don't tell us very much about their subjects. What's so great about *is-ing* on the porch? What's the platypus doing with the cheese? eating, holding, who knows? And that poor porcupine?
Now, let's plug in some strong verbs.
*The penguin **sleeps** on the porch*
*The platypus **devoured** the cheese.*
*The porcupine **suffers from** the flu .*
*Too many animals **occupy** my house.*
The last sentence eliminates the "there" construction entirely. Now if I can just eliminate those animals!

See how the strong sentences are much more descriptive and lively? The penguin isn't merely on the porch, he's not just there, existing on the porch, he's sleeping, or he's jumping, or groveling, or howling, or drooling. Whatever. He's *doing* something. Make sure your sentences *do something*.

Sometimes, of course, it's hard to avoid *there is/are,* as in this sentence:
There is no hope.
Sometimes, there just isn't.

Common Grammar mistakes/issues
Identify, correct and explain:
• Passive sentences, agent/action prose, and dummy subjects:
    It is certain that the student was hit by the teacher. There was no doubt about it.
• Sentence fragments:
    Since the student did not read the assignment that was given out yesterday.
• Subject verb agreement:
    This story have bored me to tears.
• Comma splices: A comma splice is the use of a comma where a period should be. My general rule for comas is: unless you really know how to use them *don't use them.* Use a period.
    I have told you many times about comma splices, why don't you do something about them?
    That sentence should actually be two: (1) a declarative sentence and (2) a question.
However, note that sometimes a comma *must* be used, for instance to disambiguate a sentence or to avoid confusion:
    Mostly, pizza is eaten by the slice.
• Correct form of *its* and *it's*: Don't confuse *its* (possessive referent) with *it's* (contraction of *it is*). Circle the correct form.
    I think its/it's too bad. I think its/it's head fell off.

Fix these sentences:

1. I joined the circus, I moved from town to town.

2. The food on the road was bad. Greasy and fattening.
3. Once I had an affair with an acrobat I felt better.
4. However it had to end, the trapeze made me dizzy.
5. Besides I like animals. Especially elephants and monkeys.
6. I hope one day to get a job working in a zoo, the food is much better.

One more tip: *Flow*
Teachers often ask students to make their sentences *flow*. But what does this mean?
I find that a sentence flows if it is easy to comprehend; but this does not necessarily mean that a sentence is simple in meaning. It means that the structure, the syntax of the sentence, follows normal English word order (SVO) and keeps the syntactic units close together. I talked about SVO sentences above and why they are easier to comprehend—because they follow the normal world order in English. But quite often, sentences can become pretty complex, mixing up work order, and resulting in *non-parallel clauses*. For example:

> On the beach I saw yesterday the most incredible sight, which made me realize that the universe must have been created, and everything in it, by a most ridiculous being, or, I could never begin to understand such a designer, if by an intelligent designer.

But now notice this revision:

> Yesterday, I saw the most incredible sight on the beach. It made me realize that the universe and everything in it must have been created by a most ridiculous being; or, if it were created by an intelligent designer, I could never begin to understand such a designer.

Which one flows better? The second, for several reasons. For one, 'yesterday' does not interrupt the SVO order of 'I saw the most incredible sight…' Secondly, rather than connecting two clauses with 'which,' a word that is often ambiguous, it starts a new sentence. And while the second sentence uses a passive construction, it keeps the noun phrases 'the universe' and 'everything in it' together as a single noun phrase, rather than interrupting them with a verb phrase ('must have been created'). It also avoids the awkward 'if from intelligent design' by keeping two clauses in parallel. Note that the last sentence in the first passage has two clauses:
> 1. I could not begin to understand such a designer
> 2. if by an intelligent designer

These clauses are not in parallel because they do not have the same structure. The first has SVO, but the second has no subject or verb; it has only a prepositional object phrase, with its subject implied. But the second passage has this:
> 1. if it were created by an intelligent designer,
> 2. I could never begin to understand such a designer.

These clauses are in parallel, because they have the same basic structure They are both SVO clauses. Maybe the second set sounds repetitive. But it is exact.

Another factor that helps with the flow in that sentence is that the sentence in the second passage follows an "if - then" structure, which is typical of how we write (or think) in English: We think of a condition, 'if'—and then the result of that condition—'then'. But the sentence in the first passage starts with the result, and then ends with the "if," the condition. So, since it puts the elements backwards, it goes against our typical expectations when reading. **And that's the key to clear, flowing prose:** *maintain the expectation of your reader*! You can of course

exploit those expectations for *rhetorical* or *poetic* effect. But to do that effectively you have to use the typical expectations, as well.