# *Who's Kicking Who?*

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*EDITOR'S NOTE: In* Revising Prose, *Lanham explains and illustrates his eight-step "Paramedic Method" of editing for style. Steps one through five are described in this, the first chapter. The final three steps consist of marking off the rhythmic units of each sentence, reading it aloud, then marking off new sentence lengths based on the reading.*

No student these days feels comfortable writing simply "Jim kicks Bill." The system seems to require something like "One can easily see that a kicking situation is taking place between Bill and Jim." Or, "This is the kind of situation in which Jim is a kicker and Bill is a kickee." Jim cannot enjoy kicking Bill; no; for school use, it must be "Kicking Bill is an activity hugely enjoyed by Jim." Absurdly contrived examples? Here are some real ones:

> This sentence is in need of an active verb.
>
> Physical satisfaction is the most obvious of the consequences of premarital sex.
>
> In strict contrast to Watson's ability to control his mental stability through this type of internal gesture, is Rosalind Franklin's inability to even conceive of such "playing."

See what they have in common? They are like our Bill and Jim examples, 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 for a verb we make do with "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 it sound stilted?)

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 see 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 really a *consequence* of premarital sex, in the same way that, say, pregnancy is. And, as

generations of women 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-j-12=.66. 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" seems 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 student 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, 79%). At its worst, academic prose makes us laugh by describing ordinary reality in extraordinary language.

The student writing about James Watson's *The Double Helix* stumbles on the standard form of absent-minded academic prose: a string of prepositional phrases and infinitives, then a lame "to be" verb, then more prepositional phrases and infinitives. Look at the structure:

> *In* strict contrast *to* Watson's ability *to* control his mental stability *through* this type *of* internal gesture, *is* Rosalind Franklin's inability *to* even conceive *of such* "playing."

Notice how long this laundry list takes to get going? The root action skulks down there in "ability to control." So we revise: "Watson controls himself through these internal gestures; Rosalind Franklin does not even know such gestures exist." I've removed "in strict contrast" because the rephrasing clearly implies it. I've given the sentence two simple root verbs—"controls" and "knows." And I've used the same word—"gestures"—for the same concept in both phrases to make the contrast tighter and easier to see. We've reduced seven prepositional phrases and infinitives to one prepositional phrase, and thus banished that DA-da-da, DA-da-da monotony of the original. A lard factor of 41% but, more important, we've given the sentence shape; some life flows from its verbs.

The drill for this problem stands clear. Circle every form of "to be" ("is," "was," "will be," "seems to be") and every prepositional phrase. 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 invite disaster. With a little practice, sentences like "The mood Dickens paints is a bleak one" will turn into "Dickens paints a bleak mood" (LF 38%) almost before you've written them.

Prepositional phrase strings do not, of course, always come from undergraduates. Look at these "of" strings from a linguist, a literary critic, and a popular gourmet:

> It is the totality *of* the interrelation *of* the various components *of* language and the other communication systems which is the basis for referential memory.

> These examples *of* unusual appropriateness *of* the sense *of* adequacy to the situation suggest the primary signification *of* rhyme in the usual run *of* lyric poetry.

> Frozen breads and frozen pastry completed the process *of* depriving the American woman *of the* pleasure *of* boasting *of her* baking.

The "of" strings are the worst of all. They look like a child pulling a gob of bubble gum out into a long string. When you try to revise them, you can feel how fatally easy the "is and of" formulation can be for expository prose. And how fatally confusing, too, since to find an active, transitive verb for "is" means, often, adding a specificity the writer has not provided. So, in the first example, what does "is the basis for" really mean? And does the writer mean that language's components interact with "other communication systems," or is he talking about "components" of "other communication systems" as well? The "of" phrases refer back to those going before in so general a way that you can't keep straight what really modifies what. So revision here is partly a guess.

> Referential meaning emerges when the components of language interact with other communication systems.

Or the sentence might mean

> Referential meaning emerges when the components of language interact with the components of other communication systems.

Do you see the writer's problem? He has tried to be more specific than he needs to be, to build his sentence on a noun ("totality") that demands a string of "of's" to qualify it. Ask where the action is, build the sentence on a *verb*, and the "totality" follows as an implication. Noun-centeredness like this generates most of our present-day prose sludge.

The second example, out of context, doesn't make much sense. Perhaps "These examples, where adequacy to the situation seems unusually appropriate, suggest how rhyme usually works in lyric poetry." The third is easy to fix. Try it.

In asking who's kicking who, a couple of mechanical tricks come in handy. Besides getting rid of the "is's" and changing every passive voice ("is defended by") to an active voice ("defends"), you can squeeze the compound verbs hard, make every "are able to" into a "can," every "seems to succeed in

creating" into "creates," every "cognize the fact that" (no, I didn't make it up) into "think," every "am hopeful that" into "hope," every "provides us with an example of" into "exemplifies," every "seeks to reveal" into "shows," and every "there is the inclusion of" into "includes."

And you can amputate those mindless introductory phrases, "The fact of the matter is that" and "The nature of the case is that." Start fast and then, as they say in the movies, "cut to the chase" as soon as you can. Instead of "the answer is in the negative," you'll find yourself saying "No."

We now have the beginnings of the Paramedic Method (PM):

1. Circle the prepositions.
2. Circle the "is" forms.
3. Ask "Who is kicking who?"
4. Put this "kicking" action in a simple (not compound) active verb.
5. Start fast—no mindless introductions.

Let's use the PM on a more complex instance of blurred action, the opening sentences of a psych paper:

> The history of Western psychological thought has long been dominated by philosophical considerations as to the nature of man. These notions have dictated corresponding considerations of the nature of the child within society, the practices by which children were to be raised, and the purposes of studying the child.

Two actions there—"dominate" and "dictate"—but neither has fully escaped from its native stone. The prepositional phrase and infinitive strings just drag them down.

The history
of Western psychological thought *by*
philosophical considerations *as to* the
nature *of man*

*'j- * *
*of* the nature
*of the* child *within*
society *by* which
children *to be*
raised *of* studying

We next notice, in asking "Who is kicking who?," all the *incipient* actions lurking in the nouns: *thinking* in "thought," *consider* in "considerations," more *thinking* somewhere in "notions." They hint at actions they don't supply and thus blur the actor-action relationship still further. We want, remember, a plain active verb, no prepositional phrase strings, and the natural actor firmly in charge. The actor must be "philosophical considerations as to the nature of man;" the verb "dominates;" the object of the action "the

history of Western psychological thought." Now the real problems emerge. What does "philosophical considerations as to the nature of man" really mean? Buried down there is *a question:* "What is the nature of man?" The "philosophical considerations" just blur this question rather than narrow it. Likewise, the object of the action—"the history of Western psychological thought"—can be simply "Western psychological thought." Shall we put all this together in the passive form that the writer used? "Western psychological thought has been dominated by a single question: what is the nature of man?" Or, with an active verb, "A single question has dominated Western psychological thought: what is the nature of man?" Our formulaic concern with the stylistic surface—passives, prepositional phrases, kicker and kickee—has led here to a much more focused *thought.*

The first sentence passes its baton very awkwardly to the second. "Considerations," confusing enough as we have seen, become "these notions" at the beginning of the second sentence, and these "notions," synonymous with "considerations" in the second. We founder in these vague and vaguely synonymous abstractions. Our unforgiving eye for prepositional phrases then registers *"of* the nature *of* the child *within* society." We don't need "within society;" where else will psychology study children? And "the nature of the child" telescopes to "the child." We metamorphose "the practices by which children were to be raised" into "child-rearing," and "the purposes in studying the child" leads us back to "corresponding considerations of the nature of the child within society," which it seems partly to overlap. But we have now a definite actor, remember, in the first sentence—the "single question." So a tentative revision: "The same basic question has dictated three subsequent ones: What are children like? How are they to be raised? Why should we study them?" Other revisions suggest themselves. Work a couple out. In mine, I've used "question" as the baton passed between the two sentences because it clarifies the relationship between the two. And I've tried to expose what real, clear action lay hidden beneath the conceptual cotton-wool of "these notions have dictated corresponding considerations."

This two-sentence example of student academic prose rewards some reflection. First, the sentences *make no grammatical or syntactical mistakes.* Second, *they need not have come from a student.* Any issue of a psychology journal or text will net you a dozen from the same mold. Third, not one in a thousand TA's or professors reading this prose will think anything is wrong with it. Just the opposite. It reads just right; it sounds professional. The teacher's comment on this paper reads, in full: "An excellent paper—well conceived, well organized and well written—A+." Yet it makes clear neither its main actor nor action; its thought consistently blurs in vague general concepts like "considerations," "notions," and the like; and the cradle-rocking monotony of its rhythm puts us to sleep. It reveals a mind writing in formulae, out of focus, putting no pressure on itself. The student is not thinking so much as, on a scale slightly larger than normal, *filling in the blanks.* You can't build bridges thinking in this muddled way; they will fall down. If you bemuse yourself thus

in a chemistry lab, you'll blow up the apparatus. And yet the student, obviously very bright, has been invited to write this way and is rewarded for it. He or she has been doing a stylistic imitation, and has brought it off successfully. Chances are great that the focused, plain-language version I've offered will get a much lower grade than the original. Revision is always perilous and paradoxical, but nowhere more so than in the academic world.