

## Where's the Action?

Richard A. Lanham

Richard A. Lanham, professor emeritus of English at UCLA, has written about style, classical rhetoric, literacy, computers, and literature, always in an engaging and lively style. Some of his books are *Style: An Anti-Textbook*, *Revising Business Prose*, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, and *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts*, as well as *Revising Prose*, the source of the following selection. In this essay Lanham introduces the Paramedic Method, a simple procedure for analyzing and revising sentences to avoid the tangled prose of the Official Style and give one's writing life and vigor.

### 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 sheet of paper and mark off its basic rhythmic units with a "/".
7. Read the passage aloud with emphasis and feeling.
8. Mark off sentence lengths in the passage with a "/".

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 "Boy meets Girl." The system requires something like "A romantic relationship is ongoing between Boy and Girl." Or "Boy and Girl are currently implementing an interactive romantic relationship." Or still better, "It can easily be seen that an interactive romantic relationship is currently being implemented between Boy and Girl." Contrived examples? Here are some real ones. A businessman denied a loan does not suffer but instead says that "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

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learning process." An undergraduate wants to say, "Lungsick Inc. and other companies have spent years trying to find a substitute for asbestos." But it comes out, "Identification of an acceptable substitute for asbestos in asphalt mastics has been the subject of research by Lungsick Inc. and other manufacturers for several 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."

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 central imbalance, a dominance of nouns and an atrophy of verbs. They enshrine the triumph, worshipped in every bureaucracy, of stasis over action. This basic imbalance 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 kind of 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, or to, you in the bureaucratic world of the future—and the future is only going to get more bureaucratic. You ought then to be able to see what "good" and "bad" mean for prose, and what you are really 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

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 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."

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What do these examples 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 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 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,  $12 - 4 = 8$ ;  $8 \div 12 = .66$ . 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 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 79%). At its worst, academic prose makes us laugh by describing ordinary reality in extraordinary language.

The writer discussing James Watson's *The Double Helix* sleepwalks into 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; given the sentence two simple root verbs—"controls" and "knows"; and, to make the contrast tighter and easier to see, used the same word—"gestures"—for the same concept in both phrases. 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*, and 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," "have been") 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 35%) almost before you've written them.

Undergraduates have no monopoly on that central element in The Official Style, the string of prepositional phrases. Look at these strings from a lawyer, a scientist, and a critic:

Here is an example *of the use of the rule of justice in argumentation.*

*One of the most important results of the presentation of the data is the alteration of the status of the elements of the discourse.*

*In the light of the association in the last quarter of the sixteenth century of wit with the means of amplification, which consist mainly of the processes of dialectical investigation, this definition probably has more validity than has generally been accorded it.*

The *of* strings are the worst of all. They seem to reenact a series of hiccups. When you try to revise them, you can feel how fatally easy the "is" plus prepositional phrase Official Style formula is for prose style. They blur the central action of the sentence—you can't find out what is really going on. Let's try revising.

Here is an example of the use of the rule of justice in argumentation.

"Rule of justice" is a term of art, so we must leave it intact. After we have found an active verb—"exemplify"—buried in "is an example of the use of," the rest follows easily.

This passage exemplifies argumentation using the rule of justice.

Now, how about the second sentence. It represents a perfect Official Style pattern: string of prepositional phrases + "is" + string of prepositional phrases. Let's diagram it for emphasis:

One

of the most important results  
of the presentation  
of the data  
is the alteration

of the status  
of the elements  
of the discourse.

See the formulaic character? The monotonous rhythm? The blurred action? I'm not sure what this sentence means, but the action must be buried in "alteration." Start there, with an active, transitive verb—"alter." How about "Presentation of the data alters the status of the discourse elements"? Or less formally, "The status of the discourse elements depends on how you present the data." Or it may mean, "You don't know the status of the elements until you have presented the data." At least two different meanings swim beneath the formulaic prose. To revise it you must *rethink* it.

Now, the third sentence:

In the light  
of the association  
in the last quarter  
of the sixteenth century  
of wit  
with the means  
of amplification,  
which consist mainly  
of the processes  
of dialectical investigation,

this definition probably has more validity than has generally been accorded it.

Here, the prepositional phrases have been assembled into a gigantic preparatory fanfare for a central action which does not come until the end—

this definition probably has more validity.

These slow-motion openings, a sure sign of The Official Style, drain all the life from the sentence before we ever get to the verb, and hence the action. I'll revise to get off to a faster start, using my knowledge of what the writer—behind the infarcted prose—was trying to say:

This definition holds true more than people think, especially considering what wit meant around 1600. (15 words instead of 42; LF 64%)

#### "BLAH BLAH IS THAT" OPENINGS

The formulaic slo-mo opening often provides your first taste of The Official Style. And it is a fatally easy habit to fall into. Let's look at some typical examples of what we will call the "Blah blah is that" opening from students, professors, and writers at large:

What I would like to signal here *is that* . . .

My contention *is that* . . .

What I want to make clear *is that* . . .

What has surprised me the most *is that* . . .

The upshot of what Heidegger says here *is that* . . .

The first *is that* . . .

The point I wish to make *is that* . . .

What I have argued here *is that* . . .

My opinion *is that* on this point we have only two options . . .

My point *is that* the question of the discourse of the human sciences . . .

The fact of the matter *is that* the material of this article is drawn directly from . . .

The one thing that Belinda does not realize *is that* Dorimant knows exactly how to press her buttons.

Easy to fix this pattern; just amputate the mindless preludial fanfare. Start the sentence with whatever follows "Blah blah *is that* . . ." On a word processor it couldn't be simpler: do a global search for the phrase "is that" and revise it out each time. For example:

The upshot of what Heidegger says here is that . . .

My opinion is that on this point we have only two options . . .

My point is that the question of the discourse of the human sciences . . .

The fact of the matter is that the material of this article is drawn directly from . . .

We can even improve my favorite from this anthology:

The one thing that Belinda does not realize is that Dorimant knows exactly how to press her buttons.

By amputating the fanfare, you *start fast*, and a fast start may lead to major motion. That's what we're after. Where's the *action*?

Writers addicted to the "blah blah *is that*" dead rocket often tie themselves in knots with it. One writes: "The position we are at is this." Another: "The traditional opposite notion to this is that there are. . . ." And a third, a university professor, in an article accurately titled "On the Weakness of Language in the Human Sciences," offers this spasmodic set of *thises*, *thats* and *whats*:

Now *what* I would like to know specifically is *this*: *what* is the meaning of *this* "as" *that* Heidegger emphasizes so strongly when he says *that* "*that* which is explicitly understood"—*that* is, *that* which is interpreted—"has the structure of something as something"? My opinion is *that* what Heidegger means is *that* the structure of interpretation (*Auslegung*) is figural rather than, say, intentional. (Emphasis mine.)

In escaping from this Houdini straitjacket, a couple of mechanical tricks come in handy. Besides eliminating 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." Then, after amputating those mindless *fact that* introductory-phrase fanfares, you'll start fast. After that fast start, "cut to the chase," as they say in the movies, as soon as you can. Instead of "the answer is in the negative," you'll find yourself saying "No."

#### THE PARAMEDIC METHOD

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

1. Circle the prepositions.
2. Circle the "is" forms.
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4. Put this "kicking" action in a simple (not compound) active verb.
5. Start fast—no slow windups.

Let's use the PM on a more complex instance of blurred action, the opening sentences of an undergraduate 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 here—"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.  
. . .  
of the nature  
of the child  
within society . . .  
by which children . . .  
to be raised . . .

of studying . . .

In asking, "Where's the action?" "Who's kicking who?" we next notice all the actions fermenting 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 a 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, becomes "these notions" at the beginning of the second sentence, and these "notions," synonymous with "considerations" in the first sentence, dictate more but different "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:

This basic question leads to three others: What are children like? How should they be raised? Why should we study them?

Other revisions suggest themselves. Work out a couple. 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."

A single question has dominated Western psychological thought: What is the nature of man? This basic question leads to three others. What are children like? How should they be raised? Why should we study them?

This two-sentence example of student academic prose rewards some reflection. First, the sentences boast 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. How else did the student learn to write them? Third, not many instructors 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 a typical specimen sentence from it makes clear neither its main actor nor action; its thought consistently puffs into vague general concepts like "considerations," "notions," and the like; and its cradle-rocking monotonous rhythm puts us to sleep. It reveals a mind writing in formulas, out of focus, above all a mind putting no pressure on itself. The writer 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 rewarded for it. He or she has been doing a *stylistic imitation*, and has brought it off successfully. Chances are that the focused, plain-language version I've offered would get a lower grade than the Official Style original. Revision is always perilous and paradoxical, but nowhere more so than in the academic world. Not so perilous, though, as bridges that fall down or lab apparatus that blows up. In the long run, it is better to get your thinking straight and take your chances.