FLESH-AND-BLOOD CHARACTERS

Two of the most important elements of writing with clarity—and the keys to active voice—are subjects and verbs. Readers need both “flesh-and-blood characters” (subjects) and “actions” (verbs) in order to understand sentences clearly, but of the two elements, they need good characters more. Without a character, a sentence can have no real action, and without action, a sentence can’t really be an active sentence!

WRITING FLESH-AND-BLOOD CHARACTERS

1. Find the main character in the sentence.
   a. If you can’t find it right away, underline the first seven to eight words in the sentence; you can most likely locate it there:
      i. The decision that the congregation made was to stop the crows from nesting in the church’s bell tower.
   b. Determine what word or phrase in this section of the sentence is doing the action:
      i. The decision that the congregation made……. Congregation → made [decision]
   c. Focus the sentence on the doer of the action (the character) first. Put the character and action as close to the beginning of the sentence—and as close together—as possible:
      i. The congregation decided to stop the crows from nesting in the church’s bell tower.
   d. Sometimes the characters are easy to spot; other times, they will be an object of a preposition, implied, or connected to a nominalization (which happens when a writer turns a verb into a noun):
      i. Distraction from technology in the classroom often leads to poor student performance.
      ii. Distraction from technology……. Technology → distracts

2. If the main character is missing, construct one.
   a. A writer can do this by repurposing a word or phrase not previously used as a subject, or creating a character through a relevant abstraction.
      i. The ballgame was canceled due to inclement weather. → Town officials canceled the ballgame due to inclement weather.

Creating “flesh-and-blood characters” is a vital part of writing in active voice.

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