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Grammar and Style: Actions & Characters
Adapted from Joseph Williams' and Joseph Bizup's
Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace, 5th ed.
"Lesson 2: Actions" & "Lesson 3: Characters"

Williams' Principles of Clarity:

#1: Make main characters subjects

#2: Make important actions verbs

A third principle supports these first two: avoid *nominalizations* when possible (a noun derived from a verb or adjective; ex.: "Nussbaum develops an argument" vs. "Nussbaum argues" ("argument" is a nominalization)).

To create clearer, more effective sentences, try the following technique:

- 1) Identify the subject of the sentence and make the subject a character: a person or agent that concretely does something;
- 2) Make the most important action a verb (not a nominalization).

Example:

"Fighting governmental corruption makes a contribution to fostering international development."

This sentence is unclear because we don't know the character (who is fighting corruption?) and the action of the sentence is a nominalization. If we assume that "national governments" is the character and "fostering international development" is the action, the sentence could be revised as follows:

"When national governments fight corruption in their administrations, they foster international development."

Practice: Briefly scan your paper, looking for long, complex sentences that take a little extra effort to understand. Choose a sentence to revise. Look for the main character and main action of the sentence and revise to make these the subject and verb of the sentence, respectively. Eliminate any nominalizations.