mountain where we live, where it is quiet and I am surrounded by nature. I also love running with my Australian Cattle Dog and listening to audio books as I go, because I don't get much time to read books now. (I am currently enthralled by *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt.) I go to pilates once a week to stretch and to stay strong. I love our garden, which is full of home-grown veggies and fruit, and we have a number of free-range chickens. All these activities help me to relax and unwind.

PB: *Would you encourage others to join the profession of language practitioners?*
JM: Yes, I would. It is my perfect job. My first love was reading and English, and I enjoy medicine, so incorporating both is just perfect for me. If you like structure, style, detail, correct English and reading, then this profession is for you. I also love the flexibility of being a freelance – no commuting or office hours, although it is easy to get distracted by home life. It works really well for our family and I am so grateful that I can do this. ✐

#verbusage

Using VERBS with VIGOUR

PART 2

By Lin Aecer

In this issue of *PEGboard*, the aspects of verb usage I'll be looking at include active versus passive voice, active verbs versus nounisms (or verbal nouns), and the subjunctive versus the indicative mood. Mastering each of these will help you improve your clients' writing to make it more concise, clearer and more accessible.

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Active versus passive voice

For most readers (especially second- and third-language speakers), texts written in the active voice are usually much more readable and accessible. This is largely because sentences written in the active voice are constructed in the following sequence:

subject (**S**) ⟶ verb (**V**) ⟶ object (**O**)

This makes it easier for the reader to identify the actor/agent (S), the action (**V**), and the person/thing acted upon (**O**). For example:

Active voice: The teacher ⟶ handed out ⟶ the examination scripts.
　　　　　　　　　　S　　　　　　**V**　　　　　　　　　**O**

In texts written in the passive voice, the order is usually reversed:

object (**O**) ⟶ verb (**V**) ⟶ subject (**S**)

This can make the text less readable or the author's intended meaning less accessible. This is largely because the object occupies the usual position of the subject/actor, and the subject occupies the usual position of the object/thing acted upon. In addition, the verb itself becomes more indirect (*were handed out*) and the subject becomes the object in a prepositional phrase (*by the teacher*). As a result, passive-voice constructions tend to lead to longer sentences, which can increase their level of difficulty. For example:

Passive voice: The examination scripts ⟶ were handed out ⟶ by the teacher.
　　　　　　　　　　　　　O　　　　　　　　**V**　　　　　　**S**

If the author intended to place greater emphasis on the object by placing it at the beginning of the sentence, then the use of the passive voice can be justified, or even more effective. In this passive-voice construction, the fact that the examination scripts were handed out could then be considered more important than who handed them out.

Sometimes, in passive-voice constructions, the actor/agent is omitted entirely – largely because it doesn't matter who performed the action or it is clear who the actor/agent is anyway. For example:

Passive voice (no actor/agent):

The examination scripts ⟶ were handed out.
　　　　　O　　　　　　　　　　**V**

We can conclude from these examples that passive-voice constructions are not inherently wrong, as long as they do not make texts inaccessible, ie more convoluted or wordier. According to Plain Language principles, 'inaccessible' could be interpreted as 'requiring more than one reading for the meaning to be clearly understood'. You as the editor should apply this criterion when deciding whether to retain or convert the passive voice. **>**

Active verbs versus nounisms (or verbal nouns)

The use of nounisms (also called verbal nouns or nominalisations) can make texts vastly more inaccessible. A nounism is an instance of a verb that has been transformed into a noun:

- *appoint* becomes *appointment*
- *register* becomes *registration*
- *accrue* becomes *accrual*.

These words tend to be problematic for three main reasons:

1. They are longer and, therefore, more difficult (ie polysyllabic) words than the shorter verb forms.
2. They are usually couched in phrases, which leads to wordier, more inflated sentences.
3. They can result in a more formal tone or register, which may be inappropriate to a given text, or even intimidating or offensive. For example:

Active verb form: We *invite* you to our party. Please *acknowledge* receipt and *confirm* your attendance by 10 May.

Nounism form: An *invitation* to our party has been sent to you. *Acknowledgement* of receipt and *confirmation* of your attendance by 10 May would be appreciated.

Notice that these nounisms usually end in *-ent*, *-tion* or *-sion* (and sometimes *-al*), which makes them easy to identify. They are also at least one syllable longer than their verb forms and couched in two- or three-word phrases. They tend, therefore, to inflate sentence length unnecessarily – another impediment to making text accessible. And notice how the tone or register of the two sentences containing nounisms has also become haughty.

Worse yet is the fact that the sentences containing nounisms tend also to be passive-voice constructions in which the subject is often hidden! Consider these two sentences and their active-voice alternatives:

Nounism form: The workers *will hold discussions* about the project with whoever *has the responsibility for its coordination*.

Active verb form: The workers *will discuss* the project with whoever *is responsible for coordinating it*.

Nounism form: The *management of* the project was becoming more difficult.

Active verb form: *Managing* the project was becoming more difficult.

Surely the active verb forms are more accessible? As far as possible, try to edit out such soulless verbosity – often found in textbooks and reports.

Subjunctive versus indicative mood

Perhaps one of the most challenging verb forms to master is that of the subjunctive mood – a grammatical mood found in many languages. Subjunctive forms of verbs are typically used to express various states of unreality, such as wish, emotion, possibility, judgement, opinion, necessity, or action that has not yet occurred. The precise situations in which they are used vary from language to language.

The subjunctive is an **irrealis** mood – one that does not refer directly to what is necessarily real. It is often contrasted with the indicative, which is a *realis* mood.

Subjunctives occur most often, although not exclusively, in subordinate clauses, particularly *if* and *that* clauses:

Realis mood: I *was* rich, but now I am poor.

Irrealis mood: If only I *were* rich, I would help to feed all the poor people in my neighbourhood.

As far as possible, try to edit out soulless verbosity – often found in textbooks and reports.

In the subjunctive, the verb *be* has not only a distinct past subjunctive *were* (instead of *was*), but also a distinct present subjunctive *be* (instead of *is* or *are*):

Realis mood: You *are* careful, I know.

Irrealis mood: I suggest that you *be* especially careful when travelling alone at night.

For most verbs, the only distinct subjunctive form is found in the third person singular (*he, she, it*) of the present tense, where the subjunctive lacks the -s ending:

Realis mood: He *stays* with his parents at weekends.

Irrealis mood: It is important that he *stay* by your side now.

The same convention applies to the use of *have* and *had*, *will* and *would*, and *can* and *could*:

Realis mood: She *has* so much talent.

Irrealis mood: If only she *had* her mother's talent, she'd go far.

Realis mood: I *will* go to the concert tonight.

Irrealis mood: I *would* go to the concert tonight if it were not raining.

Realis mood: Of course I *can* do that!

Irrealis mood: If only I *could* do that, life would be so much simpler.

Do your best to identify and correct each of these aspects of verb usage. In doing so, you will convert your clients' texts into communications that are more concise, clearer and more accessible.

Next time, I'll focus on the use of adjectives and adverbs. Until then, happy editing! ✐