

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

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## CHAPTER 1

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# ACTION

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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 "Bill loves Marge." The system requires something like "A romantic relationship is ongoing between Bill and Marge." Or "Bill and Marge are currently implementing an interactive romantic relationship." Or still better, "One can easily see that an interactive romantic relationship is currently being fulfilled between Bill and Marge." Ridiculous contrived examples? Here are some real ones.

A businessman denied a loan does not suffer but instead says, "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 learning process." An undergraduate wants to say that "Every UCLA freshman needs to learn how to cope with crowds," but it comes out as "There can be little doubt that contending with the problem of overpopulation at UCLA is one thing that every freshman needs to learn how to do." Instead of being invited "to recruit," a corporation is asked "to participate in

the recruitment process." A university bureaucrat wants to make a generous offer: "To encourage broadband system use, the ACAD will pay all line charges for the next two years." But instead, it comes out as: "In order to stimulate utilization of the broadband system, it is the intention of the ACAD to provide for central funding of all monthly line charges generated by attachment to the system over the period of the next two 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."

All these people write, and maybe even think, in the Official Style. 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 imbalance, a dominance of nouns and an atrophy of verbs. They enshrine the triumph, worshipped in every bureaucracy, of stasis over action. Real actions lurk furtively in each of the sentences I've just quoted—suffer, learn, cope, recruit, pay, speak—but they are swamped by lame "is" verbs, "shun" words ("facilitation," "intention"), and strings of prepositional phrases.

This basic imbalance between action and inertia 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 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 you, or to you, in the bureaucratic world of the future—and the future is only going to get more bureaucratic, however many efforts we make to simplify it, and its official language. You ought then to be able to see what "good" and "bad" mean for prose, and what you are 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: SMEARS AND HICCUPS

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 response to the issue of equality for educational and occupational mobility, it is my belief that a system of inequality exists in the school system.

What do they 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