ADDING ACTION AND CLARITY TO WRITING

Avoiding Weak Verbs and Passive Voice:

Linking verbs include the following forms of the verb *to be*: *be, am, is, are, was, were, being*, and *been*. Contractions such as I'm, we're, and he's are also built upon linking verbs and express a state of being. Many writers, teachers, and professionals consider these verbs weak because they do not express any action; instead, they simply tell the reader that something exists. Passive voice consists of a form of *be* and a past participle (look for *–ed* endings):

> The student's name was mentioned in the newspaper.

Passive voice tends to conceal rather than reveal information. In the sample sentence above, we do not know who mentioned the student's name or why he or she mentioned it. The following sentences also conceal important information:

> The decision was made. (Who made the decision?)

> The telephone bill was paid last week. (Who paid it?)

On the other hand, these revisions provide clear evidence of "who did what to whom":

> The senator made the decision.
> His parents paid the phone bill last week.

Weak verbs allow sentences to ramble on; often the predicates of such sentences are too lengthy and contain confusing prepositional phrases:

> Many doctors are looked at disapprovingly because of the long time the patients
> spend in the waiting room.

A revision of this sentence might eliminate some of the unneeded prepositional phrases and clearly state who disapproves of what:

> Many patients disapprove of the long time they must spend in the waiting
>
> room waiting for their doctor.

Expanding "Code Words":

> How often do you read (or write) a sentence like this:

> "Shakespeare depicts Macbeth's changing persona."

Isn't *persona* a loaded word? Your reader might not understand what the word "persona" implies; Macbeth is a pretty complicated character! How about:

> Shakespeare depicts Macbeth's gradual metamorphosis from a loyal supporter

> of the king to an uncertain conspirator to, finally, a murderer and tyrant.