

Yuba College Writing & Language Development Center

Strong Verbs

Verbs pack a lot of information into a pretty small package—when something happened, who did it, whether the action is complete, ongoing, conditional on other events, hypothetical, or yet to come. In addition, which verb we choose can carry positive or negative emotional weight. English is driven by verbs.

At the same time, concise expression is valued in English. Maybe it's just native impatience, but if something can be said well in five words, we prefer not to have to mentally process eight. Because verbs pack so much information and connotation, more than anything else, strong verbs can improve writing by making it both more vivid and more concise.

To be

To be verbs are a mainstay of English: *He is my friend; they were late; we have been waiting.* There is nothing wrong with *to be*; however, if we substitute a stronger verb from time to time we have more control over the effect we create.

There is nothing wrong with saying, “Snow White *was* asleep [four words].” But “Snow White *slumbered* [three words]” is more vivid; princesses *slumber* prettily and deeply. On the other hand, “Snow White *snoozed* [also three words]” suggests something less charming and more like a nap. Or consider Shrek: instead of saying “Shrek *was* angry [three words],” say “Shrek *fumed* [two words].” *Fumed* conjures images of pent-up energies waiting to explode, a very different anger than, say, “Shrek *fretted*,” which is a pettier, less explosive kind of anger.

Be careful, though: if you try to eliminate all the *to be* verbs in your writing, you risk sounding stilted and distracting. Nevertheless, it wouldn't hurt to take up the challenge to transform some of them in each assignment.

Got and put

Be on the lookout, too, for the many verbs using *got* and *put*. *Got to see, got up, and got there* can be revised to *realized, arose, and arrived*. Likewise, *put in, put off, put into action, and put in place* might become *installed, delayed, activated, and arranged*. The revised verbs are more vivid and more concise.

We only got to see the truth much later [nine words].

We only realized the truth much later [seven words].

He is putting off graduation until his family can be there [eleven words].

He is delaying graduation until his family can attend [nine words].

There is

Expressions like *there is* or *here are* are a mainstay of conversational English. Like *to be*, there is nothing wrong with using them. However, in writing they can be both wordy and weak. They are wordy because *there* really adds nothing of meaning to the sentence, and they are weak because the subject follows the verb, resulting in an indirect, roundabout expression. To avoid these expressions, lead with a strong subject and, if possible, substitute a stronger verb:

There are problems with the lease.

The lease has problems.

There are several good reasons to delay making this decision.
We should delay making this decision for several reasons.

There is a natural desire among adolescents to experience freedom from authority.
Adolescents naturally crave freedom from authority.

The revised sentences above are stronger because they lead with a subject that is also the “do-er” of the action (active voice). For the most part, they use stronger, more vivid verbs, and they are more concise.

Turning verbs into nouns...or adjectives

The transformation of a perfectly good active verb into a noun is called a *nominalization*: *specificity* from the verb *specify*, for example. Nominalizations take the vigor out of verbs. Another way to take the life out of a verb is to add an adjective ending: *dismissive* from *dismiss*. Though nothing is inherently wrong with the words *specificity* or *dismissive*, writing that is overloaded with this kind of language is hard to understand, almost always too wordy, and tends to use weaker verbs. Change the nouns and adjectives back into verbs if possible:

Using nominalizations: *There is a requirement that all students have an evaluation of their transcripts for placement purposes or to meet a prerequisite.*

Changing the nouns back into strong verbs: *The college requires that admissions evaluate all student transcripts for placement and prerequisites.*

The first sentence uses a *there is* structure and two nominalizations; the second sentence uses two strong verbs and is simpler, clearer, more direct, and easier to understand the first time through.

Here is a similar example:

Using adjectivization: *The supervisor was dismissive of her efforts to organize her co-workers.*

Changing the adjective back into a strong verb: *The supervisor dismissed her efforts to organize her co-workers.*

The first sentence uses a *to be* verb and the adjective *dismissive*. The second sentence changes *dismissive* into a strong verb, *dismiss*, and goes from eleven to nine words without sacrificing meaning.

Move beyond grammatical correctness. Even complex ideas—especially complex ideas—should be understandable. And after all, when instructors ask you to write 2,000 words, they mean 2,000 *good* words.

Contributed by Rosemary McKeever



This Yuba College Writing & Language Development Center Tip Sheet is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>