

To be or not *To be*: REPLACING TO BE VERBS

Forms of <i>To be</i>				
	Present	Past	Perfect	Progressive
Ι	ат	was	have been/had been	am / was being
he/she/it	is	was	has been/had been	is / was being
you/we/they	are	were	have been/had been	are / were being

I am. You are. She is. Obviously, being is essential to existence, so it's no surprise that *to be* verbs are essential in writing. (In fact, the previous sentence used three *to be* verbs. Can you spot them?) We're the first to admit that it is nearly impossible to write without using an occasional *are* or *is*. (In fact, we just used two more!) However, most of us rely too heavily on *to be* verbs or use them unconsciously. *To be* verbs lack the vigor and power offered by stronger, more-action packed verbs. As a result, our writing suffers.

Try the techniques below to invigorate your prose.

1. Replace the *to be* verb with a stronger, more specific verb:

Weak & Wordy	Strong & Specific
My sister <u>is</u> loud when she <u>is</u> telling her children to do their homework.	My sister bellows when telling her children to do their homework.

Sometimes, this requires changing the word order in a sentence:

Weak & Wordy	Strong & Specific
The restaurant's food <u>is</u> excellent.	The restaurant <i>serves</i> excellent food.

2. Change one or more of the nouns in the sentence into a verb:

Weak & Wordy	Strong & Specific
Jennifer Lawrence <u>is</u> the <u>star</u> of	Jennifer Lawrence stars in <i>The Hunger</i>
The Hunger Games.	Games.
Our mother <u>was</u> the <u>driver</u> of the bus.	Our mother drove the bus.

3. Combine short, choppy sentences to eliminate to be verbs:

Weak & Wordy	Strong & Specific
The food at the restaurant is excellent.	The restaurant <i>serves</i> excellent food,
The hamburgers <u>are</u> juicy. The onion	including juicy hamburgers, crispy
rings <u>are</u> crispy. The pie <u>is</u> the best I	onion rings, and the best pie I have ever
have ever eaten.	eaten.

4. Avoid overusing there is, there are, there were, this is, etc.

Weak & Wordy	Strong & Specific
The restaurant's parking lot is narrow.	The restaurant <i>suffers</i> from a narrow
<u>There are</u> not very many parking	parking lot with only a few cramped
spaces and those <u>that are</u> available	spaces.
are too cramped.	

In the strong example above, we not only combined sentences to eliminate *to be* verbs, but we also eliminated *there are* and *that are*. Such expressions delay or minimize the subject and add needless words. In the revisions below, we rearranged the sentences to emphasize the subjects, chose stronger verbs, and cut needless words.

Weak & Wordy	Strong & Specific
It is my intention to transfer to a four-	I intend to transfer to a four-year
year university.	university.
There were some important findings	This experiment <i>resulted</i> in some
resulting from this experiment.	important findings.

Sometimes, you can cut unnecessary words with no other changes:

Weak & Wordy	Strong & Specific
He struggled with the paper <u>that was</u>	He struggled with the paper assigned
assigned by the professor.	by the professor.

5. Replace a *to be* verb + a prepositional phrase with a strong verb:

Weak & Wordy	Strong & Specific
Electric car technology <u>was in</u>	Electric car technology existed as
existence as early as 1830.	early as 1830.
Negative advertising <u>is influential on</u>	Negative advertising <i>influences</i>
voters' perceptions of candidates.	voters' perceptions of candidates.
I am <u>in receipt of</u> your letter.	I <i>have received</i> your letter/ I
	<i>received</i> your letter.

6. Replace a *to be* verb + an *-ing* word with a simple verb:

Weak & Wordy	Strong & Specific
The stock market was fluctuating	The stock market <i>fluctuated</i> wildly
wildly before the crash.	before the crash.
The concept of immortality is	The concept of immortality <i>intrigues</i>
intriguing to me.	me.

This document was developed by the College Writing Center STLCC-Meramec Revised 4.15.14/FH