Use Strong Subjects In Your Writing

A complete English sentence minimally requires a subject and a verb. The subject is often defined as the character that performs the action of the verb. For example, in the sentence *Luna wrote an engaging essay*, the reader understands that *Luna* (the subject) is the character who *wrote* (the verb) the essay. Effective sentences make it clear to the reader who does what by using strong subjects/characters* and strong verbs/actions.

*Abstract nouns -those that are not physical objects – are also strong subjects (e.g., love, courage, anger).*

Avoid *it* and *there* as subjects

*It* and *there* paired with the verb *be* are consistently used as weak subjects and verbs: *it is, there is,* and *there are.* These combinations are abstract concepts that refer to the existence of something or someone, not a character and an action. In the following examples, note that using strong subjects not only increases the clarity of a sentence but also decreases its word count.

**Examples:**

a. There is a new book in the library that I would like to read. (14 words)
b. I would like to read the new book in the library. (11 words)

c. There are many students from Ontario who attend Bishop’s. (9 words)
d. Many students from Ontario attend Bishop’s. (6 words)

e. It is clear that Joseph will win the scholarship. (9 words)
f. Joseph will clearly win the scholarship. (6 words)

Sentences a, c, and e do not clearly state who does what. They only make the reader aware that a certain situation exists.

However, sentences b, d, and f have strong characters and actions: *I would like to read, students attend,* and *Joseph will win.* These three sentences are both clear and concise.

**Sometimes *it* can be used as a strong subject**

Beware: Although *it* can represent an abstract concept in a sentence, it can also represent a person, place, animal, emotion, or thing when correctly used as a pronoun. If you are not sure if your subject *it* is an abstract or strong subject, read the sentence that precedes it.
Example: I can’t wait to see the new fantasy movie. It details life in a future world.

In this case, it is a strong subject because it refers to the new movie in the previous sentence.

**Using strong subjects/characters often avoids wordy constructions**

In the following examples, the subjects *it* or *there* are used abstractly, yet the true characters of the sentences can be found in other parts of the sentence. By using strong ideas as subjects, some clauses (containing a subject and a verb) or prepositional phrases can be eliminated.

a. When it comes to social networks, there exists an abundance of sites to choose from.

   (15 words) → Social networks include an abundance of sites to choose from. (10 words)

   *The character of the sentence, social networks, was found in a subordinate clause.*

b. With the pressure put on children to excel in sports, it has started to create negative attributes in children.

   (19 words) → The pressure to excel in sports has started to create negative attributes in children. (14 words)

   *The character of the sentence, pressure, was found in a prepositional phrase.*

c. By taxing unhealthy food, it can help promote a healthier lifestyle and more balanced diet.

   (15 words) → Taxing unhealthy food can help promote a healthier lifestyle and more balanced diet. (13 words)

   *The character of the sentence, taxing, was found in a prepositional phrase.*

d. With the transition to a highly technological society, there has been a decrease in people who consider themselves religious.

   (19 words) → People who consider themselves religious have decreased with the transition to a highly technological society. (15 words)

   *This sentence is a more difficult one. Once you find the character of the sentence, people, in a prepositional phrase, the rest of the information falls into place.*

**How to strengthen subjects in your writing**

After completing the first draft of a text,

- scan the text for the word *it* used as a subject;
- check to see if the pronoun *it* refers to a noun in the previous sentence. If it does, leave the sentence as written; if it does not, find the true subject/character of the sentence and rewrite it;
- scan the text for the word *there* used as a subject;
- replace any *there* used as subject with the true subject/character of the sentence.

References: