

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.

Nouns 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 subject and verb combinations: *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 created negative attributes in children. (19 words) → The **pressure** to excel in sports has created 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 (What does *it* represent?);
- 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:

Williams, J.M. & Bizup, J. (2014). Lesson 4 Characters. In *Style lessons in clarity and grace* (11th ed., pp. 46-65). Pearson Education.

