

## Use Strong Verbs 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.

### Why use strong verbs?

Writers paint mental images with words. *Using strong verbs **gives** both precise meaning and increased impact to your writing that in turn effectively situates the reader within your text.*

Was the verb **give** a good verb choice in the previous sentence? The common definition of **give** is to present or transfer something to another. Its meaning is general (see the “Avoid other empty verbs” section in this handout). Consider the rewrite of the sentence: *Using strong verbs **conveys** precise meaning and **increases** the impact of your writing.* **Convey** can mean to communicate, and it implies a transfer of information; **increase** means to “make greater in size, amount, intensity, or degree” (Dictionary.com). These verbs are actions that the reader can associate directly to your writing. They are stronger than the verb **give** in this context.

### Use action verbs

Stative verbs, such as the verbs *be* and *have* used as main verbs, represent states of being rather than actions. They are often used excessively in hastily written texts and have little intrinsic meaning. Good writers seek to replace as many of these stative verbs as possible. For example:

- Lina **is** an economics major. → Lina **studies** economics.
- The test questions **were** different than the practice ones listed on the course Moodle. → The test questions **differed** from the practice ones listed on the course Moodle
- Leslie and her professor **had** an argument over her final grade. → Leslie and her professor **argued** over her final grade.
- Joseph **has** a house in Lennoxville. → Joseph **owns** a house in Lennoxville.

Replacing the verbs *be* and *have* with action verbs in these sentences clarifies meaning and often reduces the word count.

### Avoid other empty verbs

Empty verbs - including *give*, *take*, *make*, *do*, and *get* in addition to *be* and *have* – sometimes have little meaning on their own and are often part of expressions. These verbs should be transformed into strong verbs.

For example:

- My friend **was given** a \$500 award for her essay. → My friend **was awarded** \$500 for her essay.
- I **am taking** three classes next session. → I **am registered** in three classes next session.
- Greg **made** a sculpture of John Lennon. → Greg **sculpted** the image of John Lennon.
- Lacie **does** yoga twice a week. → Lacie **practices** yoga twice a week.
- Jules **got** an A on his final exam. → Jules **received/earned** an A on his final exam.

## Avoid verb + adverb constructions

Adverbs of manner tell the reader how an action is performed. They usually end in *-ly*. Verbs modified by these adverbs are general in meaning; that is, the verbs can be executed a number of ways. Often, a more precise verb can replace a verb + adverb combination. These precise verbs paint more vivid images in the reader's imagination.

For example:

to walk slowly → to stroll, to plod, to saunter	to walk nervously → to pace
to walk quickly → to speed walk, to trot	to walk quietly → to tiptoe
to walk proudly → to sashay, to strut	to walk aimlessly → to wander
	to walk wearily → to trudge

## Avoid phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs are two-word verbs – usually a verb plus preposition – that are commonly used idiomatically in conversation. Hundreds of them exist, yet they usually have stronger one-word verb counterparts.

For example:

- to *back* someone *up* → to *support* someone
- to *put out* a fire → to *extinguish* a fire
- to *ask around* → to *investigate*
- to *think* something *over* → to *consider* something
- to *turn down* something or someone → to *reject* something or someone
- to *cut down on* → to *reduce*

## How to strengthen verbs in your writing

Underline the verbs in the first draft of your writing and ask yourself the following questions:

- Are you overusing the verb *be* and/or other empty verbs? If so, replace as many as you can with strong verbs.
- Can your verb + adverb combinations and/or phrasal verbs be transformed into precise one-word verbs? If so, replace them.
- Do your verbs evoke clear mental images and bring your text to life? If not, choose synonyms or related words that precisely express your meaning.

Resources:

Williams, J.M. & Bizup, J. (2014). Lesson 3 Actions. In *Style lessons in clarity and grace* (11<sup>th</sup> ed., pp. 28-45). Pearson Education.

<https://www.grammar-worksheets.com/worksheets/strong-verbs.php>

