

STRENGTHENING KEY VERBS!!

Cognitive psychologists have demonstrated that readers remember best the first and last things they have read. As a result, writers can elevate the audience's perception of their authority, or *ethos*, by revising to strengthen the verbs in the first and last sentences of essay paragraphs. Draft using whatever verbs come to mind, but when revising, look for the following verbs: "to be," "to get," "to seem," "to show," and "to have" (as a main verb only; some verb tenses must use "have" as a helping verb).

"To be"

Most writers rely heavily on the verb "to be," the rough equivalent of an "equals" sign, when thinking and drafting, so look first for instances of this verb in the first and last sentences of paragraphs.

Forms of "to be": **am, is, are, was, were, will be, to be, be, being, been**

Revision offers opportunities for removing weak verbs or replacing them with stronger alternatives. The following list offers strategies for removing the verb "to be." The same strategies may be used for improving occurrences of the other "weak" verbs, including "to have," "to get," "to seem," and "to show."

1. Remove the "to be" verb.

Before: Everyone thought Mona **to be** too irresponsible for the job of Nuclear Waste Disposal Technician, even though she arrived at the interview with her own monogrammed Geiger counter.

After: Everyone thought Mona too irresponsible for the job of Nuclear Waste Disposal Technician, even though she arrived at the interview with her own monogrammed Geiger counter.

2. Use a simpler verb form, if you can do so without changing meaning.

Before: We **are** planning to hire chimpanzees to replace the members of the English department.

After: We plan to hire chimpanzees to replace the members of the English department.

Before: Well before anyone suspected dissatisfaction among the elves, an entire cheese quiche **was** flying toward Santa's head.

After: Well before anyone suspected dissatisfaction among the elves, an entire cheese quiche flew toward Santa's head.

3. Find a stronger verb within the sentence.

Before: How **is** your attention span affected when you **are** working under pressure?

After: How does working under pressure affect your attention span?

4. Change passive voice constructions to active voice.

Before: The killer robot **was** attacked by the mutant gorilla.

After: The mutant gorilla attacked the killer robot.

5. Find another word within the sentence that might contain a verb.

Before: This new floor wax flavor **is** significantly different.

After: This new floor wax flavor differs significantly.

6. Substitute a stronger verb not already contained in the sentence.

Before: One of the reasons for grumpiness among elected officials **is** the people who do their laundry use too much starch.

After: Too much starch in their underpants irritates elected officials.

7. Where appropriate within the context, change past tense constructions to present tense.

Before: As I **was** descending a climbing rope into the open mouth of the volcano, I remembered the large box of matches in my back pants pocket.

After: As I descend a climbing rope into the open mouth of the volcano, I remember the large box of matches in my back pants pocket.

8. Eliminate the “pronoun-linking verb” construction at the beginnings of sentences, usually by finding a stronger verb within the sentence.

Before: It **is** students like you who drive teachers into madhouses and early graves.

After: Students like you drive teachers into madhouses and early graves.

This strategy also helps to eliminate the weak construction formed by a subject and a verb that names a sense (“to feel,” “to smell,” “to hear,” “to taste,” “to see,” and similar verbs).

Before: I **felt** my underwear creeping up between my butt cheeks.

After: My underwear crept up between my butt cheeks.

9. Combine sentences.

Before: Some parents of adolescents suffer from anxiety about whether they brought the right infant home from the hospital many years earlier. There **are** many different reasons for this type of anxiety.

After: For many reasons, some parents of adolescents suffer from anxiety about whether they brought the right infant home from the hospital many years earlier.

10. Combine strategies.

Before: There **are** many preservatives that **are** said **to be** bad for you.

After: Many preservatives may cause health problems.

Practice:

Severus Snape is a literary character I’d like to meet.

It was my father who stole the captain’s cherries.

If vengeance is your desire, you shall never achieve it.

The oyster was enormous. I decided not to snatch the pearl.

I am sorry about the little problem with your cat’s stool sample.

It is impossible to underestimate the importance of personal hygiene.

She considered me to be too volatile for the job in the customer service department.

His offshore bank accounts are the only reason I stay with him.

Expectorating on the sidewalk here would be in violation of the law.

I refuse to read any novel featuring vampires who are shiny.

Adolescents who are not cautious can find their entire lives being consumed by Facebook.

What could be less appealing for lunch than a spaghetti taco?

He thought he had stepped in something disgusting, but he was wrong, very wrong.