

Using Strong Verbs in Academic Writing

Verbs make things happen. They make the subjects of sentences race, run, erupt, scoot, dive, climb, sprawl and ponder toward one end or another and in the process, make your writing come alive (The Working Writer, 2002 p. 248).

- When writing it is important to replace static verbs with action verbs as much as possible. Static verbs show no action and leave your sentences sounding weak and vague.

Example: The verbs *be*, *appear*, *become*, *seem*, *exist* can overwhelm your writing.

- Additionally constructions beginning with *there are*, *there is*, *it is* usually hides stronger verbs and presents weaker writing.

Example: *There are many parents who believe that their teenage children are responsible drivers.*

Many parents believe their teenage children are responsible drivers. (Revised)

- The writer should constantly edit for weak verbs and writes direct, emphatic sentences. This includes writing in the active voice (wherein the person or thing performing the action is the subject) and minimizing writing in the passive voice (wherein the recipient of the action becomes the subject)

Examples: *She has a great talent for playing soccer.* [weak action verb]

She plays soccer really well. [strong direct statement]

Mary collects books for the community library. [active voice-direct sentence]

Books are collected by Mary for the community library.[passive voice]

Practice Exercise

The following paragraph is written with some weak verbs and in the passive voice. Rewrite the paragraph and make the verbs stronger. You can provide new subjects for some sentences.

Last year a hurricane was experienced by my family and me for the first time. It was Hurricane Ellen, and much damage to our property and neighborhood was caused by its fierce winds of 200 miles per hour and its heavy rains. It soon became evident to us that we were in danger. The old oak tree that is in our backyard was uprooted and hurled across the roof of our house, creating a large hole through which the rain poured in. Our living room was flooded by the water, which rose to a height of three feet. When we began to think that the worst of the storm was over, we heard a loud crash and looked out the window to see that our car had been hit by our neighbor's fallen tree, caving in the roof and breaking all the windows. Having recently moved to the East Coast from North Dakota, we thought that a hurricane was little more than a thunderstorm. Next time, when people in our area are advised to evacuate before a hurricane comes, I'm sure our family will be the first to leave.

(Adapted from Pathways by Joyce M. Jarrett, et al., from The Writer's Workplace by Sandra and John Scarry. University of Delaware Writing Center)

Writing Concise Sentences

Writing concisely strengthens your work. It requires careful editing, but is worth the effort as it allows for precise, clear and effective writing. Here are few tips to write more concisely:

1. Replace general words with more powerful and specific words and avoid generalizations. (Generalizations in our writing usually comes in the form of overused unsupported statements.)

Example: *Many people are unaware of the climatic changes taking place in the world.[generalization]*

*The CAC **has made available** many of the resources **you can make use of** to improve your writing.*

The CAC provides many of the resources you need to improve your writing.

2. Use less idle words- think about what you can get rid of without altering meaning.

Example: *Committed students wake up **each and every day** and **they are** very determined to get assignments done, even if **these tasks** are difficult.*

3. Be mindful of automatic phrases such as 'in my opinion' 'it has come to my attention', 'due to the fact that.'
4. Minimize wordy phrases

Example: *When I started my own business, it has given me a **whole new perspective to see the bigger picture** when it comes to finding a **work / life balance**.*

5. Remove useless modifiers

Example: Words such as *undoubtedly, fortunately, really, hopefully, interestingly* etc.

6. Minimize redundancies

Example: ***First and foremost**, it is imperative that we pay attention to our **past history** as this gives us a **full and complete** picture of where we are coming from and how to improve.*

7. Avoid euphemisms (These are inoffensive words or phrases deliberately substituted for one considered harsh- while useful in delicate interactions, they are not ideal for academic writing (The Working Writer, 2002 p. 248) Example: *passed away, downsizing*

Writing Practice

The paragraph below is quite wordy- rewrite to make it more concise and precise.

Teachers from all levels of the education process, from kindergarten to graduate schools, need to take immediate steps to ensure that all students leave school fully prepared to be contributing members of society. We must make certain that they graduate ready to give back to their communities, not just to take from them; that they walk out

the doors of our institutions not just thinking about how to make a buck, but how to make a difference. Students must be taught to be civic minded, to think in terms not only of what will benefit them individually, but also in terms of what will benefit society as a whole. We have to teach them not to be selfish isolationists, but generous, willing contributors to our communities.

--from Angela Bowers, "Our Responsibility to the Community"

Revising a wordy paragraph. Underline the wordy parts of the following paragraph, and then re-write the paragraph on a separate page. Reduce the wordiness, but be sure to include all the information from the original.

Canada in Space Canada does not send space shuttles and rockets into space, so for that reason people tend to forget that Canada has made very significant contributions to space exploration. Because of its large size, Canada has specialized in satellite communications technology. In 1962, Canada became the third country in the world to have a satellite in orbit when it launched Alouette 1 in the early sixties. The Alouette 1 satellite was followed in 1972 by the Anik A-1 satellite which provided coast-to-coast across Canada telephone services. Furthermore, Canada has developed important tools for operating in space like the Canadarm. It was developed first in 1981. The Canadarm is a mechanical robotic arm used by astronauts on the American space shuttle. Canada has also provided the space industry with people to go into space. The first Canadian astronaut was Marc Garneau, who was an astronaut who did research on the space shuttle. A more recent Canadian astronaut is Julie Payette who went into space on the space shuttle in June of 1999. These contributions to the world of the space industry are important ones and should not be forgotten.

(Adapted from Douglas College Learning Centre, retrieved from <https://www.douglascollege.ca/~media/8785AE9879414F578B2306281ABA4B10.ashx>)

Additional Exercises

Exercise 1: Omitting unnecessary words

Cross out the unnecessary words in the following sentences.

Example: The children were **tired and exhausted** after the long climb to the high top of the mountain.

1. The stegosaurus was huge in size.
2. Now she is at school.
3. He was happy and joyful about the great gift.
4. Because of the fact that he got a good grade on the midterm, he decided to take the night off.
5. In the summer season, many Vancouverites like to picnic in Stanley Park.
6. On January 14, in the middle of winter, the weather was freezing cold.
7. I think smoking in public places should be banned.
8. In order to get the true facts of the case, the lawyer interviewed 4 witnesses.
9. Furthermore, Henry VIII also married six different women.
10. Redundancy is defined as unnecessary repetition.

11. New Westminster, which was British Columbia's first capital city, is located on the shores of the Fraser River.
12. The computer is sitting on top of the table.

Exercise 2: Revising wordy sentences

Rewrite the following sentences to be more concise.

1. Terry Fox is perhaps one of Canada's greatest modern heroes because of the fact that he did something amazing even though he was disabled and had lost his leg.

2. Terry Fox was born in 1958 in Winnipeg in Manitoba.

3. At the age of 19 years old, Fox was diagnosed by doctors as having an unusually rare form of bone cancer.

4. Doctors decided that they had to amputate most of one of his legs to stop the cancer from spreading to other parts of his body. _____

5. While he was recovering from the amputation, Fox came up with the idea of the "Marathon of Hope", which he hoped would help him to make a lot of money for cancer research so that cancer could be cured.

6. He began his run in St. John's in Newfoundland which he started on April 12 in the spring of 1980.

7. He ran at a pace of nearly 40 km. per day and had run 5373 km. when he got to Thunder Bay, Ontario. Thunderbay is a small city in western Ontario.

8. When he was there in Thunderbay, cancer was discovered in his lungs so he ended up having to end his run there in Ontario. _____



8. It was an inspiration to a lot of millions of people when Fox with his great bravery and devotion to his cause did his great run. _____

9. With his run, he encouraged Canadian people to contribute money, almost \$25 million dollars, for cancer research so that researchers could look for a cure for cancer.

Exercise 3: Underline the wordy parts of the following paragraph. Then re-write the paragraph on a separate page. Eliminate the wordiness, but be sure you include all the information from the original.

The Foot-in-the-Door Technique Psychologists have identified a number of techniques which are aimed at helping people to persuade others of something. One of these techniques is the “foot-in-the-door” technique. The idea behind the “foot-in-the-door technique” is that if you get someone to do something small for you, they will be more likely to do something bigger for you than if you had started with the request for the bigger thing first. In a pioneering study, researchers went door-to-door and pretended to be members of a non-profit service organization. The researchers asked two groups of people to put a large ugly unattractive sign which said “Drive Carefully” in their front yards. Members of one of the groups of people had been approached previously by different researchers who asked them to perform one of a number of lesser tasks. For example, they were asked to sign a petition which urged politicians to work to get safe driving legislation to make driving safer. Members of the other group of people were being approached by the researchers for the first time. As you might expect, the people who had already expressed a willingness to do the smaller task responded a lot more favorably to the second request than people who had not already been approached on the issue beforehand. Over 55 per cent of those people who had agreed to the initial small request agreed to post the ugly sign, and less than 17 per cent of those who were being approached for the first time agreed to put up the sign. Since this first initial study, other investigators have been examining what kind of initial request is most likely to lead to people complying with the bigger request. Some of the theorists suggest that an initial request only has a real effect on the later request if the initial request changes people’s perceptions about themselves.

(Adapted from Douglas College Learning Centre

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