



“To Be” Verb Activities

To increase the sophistication of their prose, students usually focus on nouns and adjectives. For instance, a student might dislike the sound of “many places are becoming more desert-like” and change it to “Myriad locales on planet Earth are increasing in aridity and barrenness.” Verbs are seldom given the thesaurus treatment, which leaves every aspect of the sentence feeling overburdened except the weak “to be” verb that lies at its heart.

How It Works

Ask students to choose a section of their writing and circle every “is,” “are,” “was,” “were,” and “will be.” They may express surprise that nearly every sentence includes one of these verbs.

Once students notice their overuse of “to be” constructions, they can consider ways to lessen that reliance. I don’t mandate a maximum number but simply encourage them to note their verb choices and work towards replacement.

Is-ing And Are-ing

Instead of writing “the character is experiencing...” or “the authors are showing...,” they can use the gerund as the verb (“the character experiences,” “the authors show”). Once students address “is -ing” constructions, they can tackle more complex structures.

More Complex Sample Sentences

1. “In moments like those it is very difficult to choose an idea to write about because I am often very eager about the topic and excited about many different ideas.”

“In moments like those, I find choosing an idea difficult because of my excitement about the topic.”

As this student reworked the verbs, she also corrected repetition and some unnecessary clauses.

2. “A part of the novel that really struck me was when Hazel talked about having to go to the hospital multiple times in the middle of the night due to fluid filling up in her lungs.”



“Hazel’s description of going to the hospital multiple times in the middle of the night really struck me.”

To avoid having the verb at the end of the sentence, it could be rewritten this way:

“I felt disturbed and unhappy about Hazel’s having to go to the hospital multiple times in the middle of the night due to fluid filling up in her lungs.”

Changing the verbs prompted the student to clarify her feelings: she was not merely “struck” but disturbed about what she read, so her attention to verbs led to specificity.

3. “The maids in the household are marthas, who devote their lives to helping the handmaids stay healthy so they can become pregnant. The aunts are a group of women who train the handmaids before they go off to the home.”

“The maids in the household, called ‘marthas,’ devote their lives to helping the handmaids stay healthy so they can become pregnant and receive their preparatory training from ‘aunts.’”

The verb in the first half -- “devote” rather than “are” -- adds meaning and highlights the aspect of the novel the student found most interesting.

Making The Change

Removing “it is” (example #1) allows the rest of the sentence to be rewritten as well.

Beginning with the subject of the sentence (example #2) increases concision.

Using appositive phrases and combining sentences (example #3) also strengthen the quality of the writing.

These techniques help to polish a student’s prose, and all of them can be achieved through a focus on verbs.

To Be Verb Counting

I sometimes ask students to include a count of their “to be” verbs at the end of an essay or page. Then I ask them to work on lowering that number. The concreteness of a number, the goal of lowering it, and attention towards an attainable writing achievement (as opposed to “eliminate wordiness,” which feels both abstract and insurmountable) improves the polish of the students’ writing and their ability to make meaningful stylistic changes.