

Reducing “Be” Verbs in Writing

Writers regularly require forms of the verb “be” (*am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been*). Writers use forms of “be” to

- Help main verbs communicate a sense of time. (*was typing, will be typing, is typing*)
- Link one idea to another (similar to an equal sign). (*The water bottle is black.*)
- Indicate *passive voice* when the subject receives the action. (*was purchased, will be finished, was hit, and will be spent*)

However, we often tend to rely too heavily upon the “be” verb in our writing rather than choosing a stronger main verb or rewriting the sentence in active voice. This can lead to vague, and even boring, papers. Replacing the “be” verbs helps

- Increase the coherency of claims. (clearer or more understandable)
- Identify redundant sentences/information. (unnecessary repetition)
- Broaden vocabulary.
- Energize writing and speaking.

Where does one start? Follow the simple process below to help identify the “be” verb and find a stronger way to replace it.

Step 1: Circle every “be” verb in the paper, or use MS Word’s “Find” feature to highlight them.

Step 2: Use the questions below to identify the function of the “be” verb.

- A. Is “be” used along with an –ing verb form (example: *is finishing*)?**
Helping verb. Most likely unavoidable because it is communicating a sense of time.
- B. Is “be” used along with an –ed verb or another irregular verb in the past participle tense (example: *was finished or was hit*)?**
Helping verb. Passive voice. Try to change to active voice. See step 4.
- C. Is “be” linking a subject to a description (example: *Yesterday was fun.*)?**
Linking verb. Try to replace “be” with a stronger verb. See step 3.

Step 3: Replacing “be” with a stronger linking verb.

It is not always possible to replace “be”; when possible, try a stronger linking verb from the list below. See the example below this list:

seem	appear	become	grow	remain	stay
prove	feel	look	smell	sound	taste

Example: The sunset was magnificent.
The sunset looked magnificent.

Step 4: Changing passive voice to active voice.

A “**be verb + past participle**” is passive voice (typically an -ed verb or other irregular past participle). When using passive voice, it is easier to create confusing, awkward, or wordy sentences. It takes more words to say what the writer means, and even then it is not always clear what the writer is trying to say. So, when possible, always try to write in active voice.

Active voice: The subject performs the action. (*The car hit the tree.*)

Passive voice: The subject receives the action. (*The tree was hit by the car.*)

Tips to help change the sentence from passive voice to active voice (when the sentence contains "be"):

- Use the list of irregular past tense and past participle verbs (*A Writer's Reference*, pp. 196-203, 250-2, 359-60).
- Ask who or what performs the action in the past participle verb.

Example: The speeding ticket **was contested**.

Ask: "Who or what contested the speeding ticket?"

Brian contested the speeding ticket.

Example: In 1942, Lidice, a Czech town, **was destroyed**, and all surviving women and children **were placed** in Nazi concentration camps.

Who or what destroyed Lidice? Who placed the survivors in concentration camps?

In 1942, the **Nazis destroyed** Lidice, a Czech town, **and placed** all surviving women and children in concentration camps.

NOTE: If the writer does not know the answer to the "who" or "what" question, Brian or the Nazis in these examples, the writer may leave the sentence in passive voice.

- Look for any phrases starting with "**by**" (example: *by the teacher*). If the phrase is in the same sentence as "**be + past participle**," it is most likely the subject (the person or thing causing the past participle verb). Rearrange the sentence so the subject performs the action.

Example: It **is believed by teachers** that students **should be required by the school** to have textbooks.

Teachers believe that **the school should require** students to have text books.

Example: More than five hundred homes **were damaged by tornadoes and flooding**.

Tornadoes and flooding damaged more than five hundred homes.

- Use general terms, such as "researchers," "the study," or "experts in this field" when the subject of the sentence is anonymous.

Example: **The students were surveyed** in class on Tuesday.

Researchers surveyed the students in class on Tuesday.

Example: **It was discovered** that endorphins **are released** when athletes run.

The study discovered that running **releases** endorphins.

See also *A Writer's Reference*, pp. 164-8.