WEAK VS. STRONG VERBS

Related Handouts: See PASSIVE AND ACTIVE VOICE

THE PRINCIPLE

The verb TO BE is the most commonly used verb in the English language. It comes in many forms: am, are, is, was, were, will be, has been, have been, had been, etc. We use it to state the existence or condition of something:

Downtown Greensboro is a more interesting place today than it was a year ago.

We also use forms of TO BE and TO HAVE as auxiliary verbs to show a variety of time frames – in this example, moving from present to past to future:

Downtown Greensboro is changing. With all the new bars and clubs that have opened, someone will soon be leading groups of tourists on guided pub crawls.

THE PROBLEM

The problem is that habitual use of BE and HAVE can make writing dull and wordy. Substituting stronger, more expressive verbs can both brighten and trim a person’s writing style. Consider the difference between these two paragraphs:

After many attempts to “revive" downtown Greensboro, it finally appears to be happening. Streets that were once empty after dark are now bustling with activity - or at least they are showing signs of life. There are now clubs and bars lining Elm Street and the surrounding area, and they are full of twenty- and thirty- somethings. A slightly older crowd has been lured downtown by new art galleries, and live performances are now offered at two theaters. There are a few fine restaurants that have before- and after-theater specials. There is also a new park in the middle of town that has live concerts on a regular basis. Some lunch-hour performances are held there, and many downtown workers have been attracted to them. Young families are also discovering downtown, thanks in large part to the Children’s Museum that has been open for a few years and the baseball stadium, which is brand new and which has a playground that is loved by kids.

After many attempts to “revive" downtown Greensboro, it finally appears to be happening. Streets that once stood empty after dark now bustle with activity - or at least show signs of life. Clubs and bars full of twenty- and thirty- somethings line Elm Street and the surrounding area. New art galleries and two theaters offering live performances have lured a slightly older crowd downtown, where they can find before- or after-theater specials at a few fine restaurants. A new park in the middle of town hosts live concerts on a regular basis, including some lunch-hour performances that attract many downtown workers. Young families are also discovering downtown, thanks in large part to the Children’s Museum that opened a few years ago and the brand new baseball stadium with a playground that kids love.
THE SOLUTION

The second version of our test paragraph is leaner by 31 words, and the number of BE and HAVE verbs has shrunk from 19 to 3. As a result, the writing dances to a livelier tune. Admittedly, the verbs are not the only thing that has changed, but the process of changing them has inspired and enabled other changes as well. Here are some specific ways that you can turn weak verbs into stronger ones, making your prose more muscular:

1) Use your imagination to substitute more interesting words:

- Streets that once _stood_ empty instead of Streets that _were_ once empty.
- A new park . . . _hosts_ concerts instead of _has_ concerts.

2) Whenever possible, use _active_ instead of _passive_ verbs:

- New art galleries and two theaters offering live performances _have lured_ a slightly older crowd downtown. 
  One active verb instead of the two passive verbs in the original:
- A slightly older crowd _has been lured_ downtown by new art galleries, and live performances _are now offered_ at two theaters.

- A playground that kids _love_ (active); a playground that _is loved_ by kids (passive).

3) Try not to start sentences with “there is” or “there are.”

- Clubs and bars _line_ Elm Street works better than _There are_ clubs and bars lining Elm Street.
- A new park _hosts_ live concerts beats _There is_ a new park that _has_ live concerts.

4) Use the simple present tense instead of present progressive (she _listens_ instead of she _is listening_) and the simple past tense instead of past progressive (she _listened_ instead of she _was listening_) unless you really need to show that the action is continuing (as you might, for example, in a sentence like “She is learning to play the piano” or “She was driving home when she heard the news”).

- Streets now _bustle_ with activity - or at least _show_ signs of life is stronger than Streets _are now_ _bustling_ with activity - or at least they _are showing_ signs of life.

5) Whenever possible, embed the description of something in an adjective before a noun, instead of dragging out the sentence with a noun and a “to be” verb phrase that includes an adjective:

- The _brand-new_ baseball stadium is more compact than The baseball stadium _which is brand new_

No one would suggest that you eliminate all forms of the verbs TO BE or TO HAVE from your writing. But with a little ingenuity and effort you can probably become less dependent on them. Try this experiment: underline all forms of TO BE and TO HAVE in a paragraph you have written, and then see how many of them you can change.