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# To Be or Not To Be

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*A verb, Senator, we need a verb!*

—DOONESBURY COMIC STRIP

Want one tip, a single bloat-busting strategy guaranteed to energize your sentences? Dump *to be*. Wherever you spy a weak, static, insubstantial *be*-verb—*be, being, been, am, are, is, was, were, have been, could be, will be, won't be*—think, *Opportunity*.

We can't call every *be*-verb weak. A *be*-verb works plenty hard when it acts as an auxiliary—especially when it works with the main verb to pack a wallop (*We are busting the habit of using weak be-verbs*) or to convey a colloquialism (*We be stylin'* or *I'll tell you what I'm up to if you tell me what you're on about, and then I must be off*<sup>26</sup>). A *be*-verb also pulls its weight when it points to existence itself (*We write, therefore we are*). Pow!

I'm not talking about strong *be*-verbs like those.

I'm talking about “flabby *be*-verbs,”<sup>27</sup> *be*-verbs lacking in muscle, *be*-verbs that powerful writers hunt down and expunge. Specifically, I'm talking about *be*-verbs that act as linking verbs (*The house is beige*), as expletive-supporting verbs (*It's a beige house*), or as passive-voice auxiliaries (*The house was painted beige*). Ho-hum. We'll get into fuller descriptions of these three types in a minute. First, so that you can see what I mean, let's look at some examples of sentences transformed by tossing the flaccid *be*-verbs.

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26. This example contains three phrasal *be*-verbs: *be up to* (“be doing”), *be on about* (in the United Kingdom, “be discussing”), and *be off* (“depart”).

27. Garner, *Garner's Modern American Usage*, 612.

## Word Up!

*Before:* “Education’s purpose is to replace an empty mind with an open one.” (Malcolm S. Forbes)

*After:* Education replaces an empty mind with an open one.

*Before:* “Nothing is more revealing than movement.” (Martha Graham)

*After:* Nothing reveals like movement.

*Before:* “A scheme of which every part promises delight can never be successful.” (Jane Austen)

*After:* A scheme of which every part promises delight can never succeed.

*Before:* “In all pointed sentences, some degree of accuracy must be sacrificed to conciseness.” (Samuel Johnson)

*After:* All pointed sentences must sacrifice some degree of accuracy to conciseness.

*Before:* Our product is better than your product. (any company)

*After:* Our product eats your product’s lunch.

*Before:* “There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don’t know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don’t know we don’t know.” (attributed to a one-time US secretary of defense)

*After:* We don’t know diddly—except to avoid *there are*.

The limitations of *be*-verbs have intrigued people at least as far back as the 1930s, when Alfred Korzybski developed the discipline of “general semantics.” Among other things, Korzybski explored what he called the “structural limitations” of these verbs.<sup>28</sup> His teachings inspired a

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<sup>28</sup> “Alfred Korzybski,” *Wikipedia*, last modified May 28, 2012, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred\\_Korzybski](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Korzybski).

student, D. David Bourland Jr., to develop E-Prime (English-Prime, also denoted E'), a form of English that excludes *be*-verbs. E-Prime rejects statements like *This painting is beautiful*, which presents judgment as fact, in favor of statements that “communicate the speaker’s experience,” such as *I like this painting*.<sup>29</sup>

Okay, you get it. Weak *be*-verbs: who needs them!

How do you spot a weak *be*-verb? Let’s get back to the three types: the linking verb, the expletive-supporting verb, and the passive-voice auxiliary.

A *be*-verb that acts as a linking verb usually robs your sentence of power. A linking verb (usually but not always a *be*-verb<sup>30</sup>) creates “an equivalency”<sup>31</sup> between a subject and its complement.<sup>32</sup> It acts as a simple pass-through, an equal sign. Take the statement *Their faces are pale from all this grammar talk*. The *are* acts as an equal sign: *faces = pale*. This verb connects (links) the two words: end of story. With few exceptions, a linking-verb sentence benefits when you punch it up by replacing the weak verb with a speeding bullet of a verb: *Their faces blanch with all this grammar talk*. Your readers win.

Similarly, you can ditch *there is*, *there are*, *it is*, *it was*, and other phrases formed by a *be*-verb plus an expletive. Here, *expletive* means not an obscenity but a “dummy word,” like *there* or *it*, that has no grammatical function. When you diagram an expletive sentence, the expletive floats above the other words like a let-go balloon—a disconnected, puffed-up nothing. Of sentences that start with *it is important*

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29. “E-Prime,” *Wikipedia*, last modified June 13, 2012, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E-Prime>.

30. Linking verbs include not only *be*-verbs but any other verb—*seem*, *appear*, *become*, *remain*, *grow*, *get*—that acts as an equal sign in a given sentence. Does your face grow pale from all this grammar talk?

31. Jack Hart, *Storycraft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 113.

32. Defining *complement* would take a footnote longer than even I can see burdening you with. I’d have to start by saying that a complement is a word or phrase that completes the sense of a subject, an object, or a verb, and then I’d have to define the definition, and then we’d have to get into the types of complements (like adverbial complements, adjectival subject complements, nominal subject complements...and those are just the types of linking-verb complements), so let’s not even start, okay?

to note that or it is interesting to note that, Bryan Garner says, “These sentence nonstarters merely gather lint.”<sup>33</sup> (If you’re afflicted, as I am, with the need to mark up your books, you probably just highlighted

**When you diagram an expletive sentence, the expletive floats above the other words like a let-go balloon—a disconnected, puffed-up nothing.**

*nonstarters* and *lint*.) Instead of saying *It is important to tighten your sentences*, say *Tighten your sentences*. Your readers win.

Finally, a passive-voice auxiliary sucks power from a sentence almost every time. Passive voice is a verb form that shows the subject

receiving the action instead of performing it. Tighten and strengthen such sentences by converting passive voice (*The blood was drained from my face by all that grammar talk*) to active voice (*All that grammar talk drained the blood from my face*). Your readers win.

You won’t have an easy time of it, eradicating all these types of weak *be*-verbs from your writing. They pop constantly to mind as you form thoughts. You can’t suppress them. So don’t. Let them flow. As you generate ideas—as you create your drafts, as you brainstorm, as you think inventively—let the weak *be*’s be. Later, when you hone, zero in on these verbs and on the revising opportunities they represent.

In some cases, weak *be*’s merit keeping. They can enable you to do the following:

**Linking-verb *be*’s:**

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|--------------------------------------|--|
| Play with a common expression        | Boring is in the eye of the beholder.      |
| Create a cadence                     | “The play’s the thing.” (Shakespeare)      |
| Position a key word at the end       | Rules are for breaking.                    |
| Position a key word at the beginning | Upside-down was, in fact, how Samuel felt. |

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33. Garner, *Garner’s Modern American Usage*, 486.

Define a term	An essay is a short piece of writing on one topic.
Emphasize a classification	Yes, this chapter is an essay.
Emphasize an equation	“The medium is the message.” (Marshall McLuhan.)
Emphasize a metaphor	“Love is a rose.” (Neil Young)
Heighten the diction level	“May the Force be with you.” ( <i>Star Wars</i> )
Add umph	Now <i>that’s</i> what I’m talking about.

**Expletive-supporting *be*’s:**

Fill the meter in a line of poetry	“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” (Robert Frost)
Evoke melodrama	“It is I, Snidely Whiplash!” ( <i>Dudley Do-Right</i> )

**Passive-voice *be*’s:**

State an action of an unknown doer	The wheel was invented around 8000 BC.
Avoid naming a known doer	Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564.

(For the sake of these examples, let’s assume that Shakespeare was Shakespeare. You might count yourself among those who believe that the works of Shakespeare were penned by someone else, possibly a group of playwrights who were almost certainly not all born on April 23, 1564. I offer that statement about Shakespeare’s birth, and all these follow-on statements in the parentheses, to reinforce the point that sometimes the reader is better served by what I call weak *be*’s. For example, although converting passive voice to active voice usually improves a sentence, nothing would be gained by saying, “Mary Arden gave birth

to Shakespeare on April 23.” If you want to talk about Shakespeare, don’t make his mother the subject of your sentence—even when she is, for once, at least grammatically, the actor.)

Clearly, *be*’s—even weak *be*’s—need to be. But you’ll use fewer and fewer of them as you fortify your writing. Make the break! The diffi-

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culty may surprise you. Stick with it; persistence will reward you. You’ll discover the satisfactions of writing more intentionally. You’ll use fewer clichés, fewer adjectives, fewer adverbs, fewer nouns, fewer ... words. As you wean your-

self off weak *be*’s, you’ll use more—and more forceful—verbs, the strongest part of speech there is. The strongest part of speech. Period.