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Editing for Strong Verbs

One of the final stages of revising a draft is editing for strong verbs. Editing for strong verbs results in economical and forceful prose that says exactly what you mean and holds your readers' attention. This hand-out gives you four ways you can energize the language of a final draft.

1. In many cases, strong verbs are already in the sentence but are embedded so that they don't stand out. Find the action and rebuild the sentence around it.

Weak: The truck was *loaded* with crates of bananas by the workers.

Better: The workers loaded the truck with crates of bananas.

Weak: His work shirt had dark rings where it had been *stained* with sweat.

Better: Dark rings of sweat stained his work shirt.

Note that in both of these examples, finding and using the strong verb eliminates several unnecessary words.

2. Avoid the verb "to be" in your verb phrases whenever you can, especially at the beginning of sentences. Constructions such as *There are*, *It was*, *That is*, etc. only clutter up your paper and offer little meaning; they can often be cut out.

Weak: The fire *was blazing* in the hearth.

Better: The fire blazed in the hearth.

Weak: *It was* just before dawn that they found the capsized boat.

Better: They found the capsized boat just before dawn.

3. Transform heavy nouns back into their original verb forms. These polysyllabic nouns produce awkward and labored prose. Look for the five most common Latin endings on such nouns; they are: *tion*, *ment*, *ing*, *ion*, and *ance*.

Weak: She made the announcement that she had quit her job.

Better: She announced that she had quit her job.

Weak: We drew the conclusion that he wasn't coming after all.

Better: We concluded that he wasn't coming after all.



4. Other strong verbs help readers see and hear actions more vividly. They “show” the actions, rather than “tell” them.

Weak: I *came* home and *told* Mother my crime.

Better: I stumbled home and blurted my crime to Mother.

Weak: She *picked* a rose from the bouquet.

Better: She plucked a rose from the bouquet.

Notice that the strong verbs in the revised examples convey an intensity of action that the weak verbs don't. To “pound” is much more emphatic than to hit. Be aware, however, that two actions, like “pick” and “pluck,” differ slightly in meaning. Writers should be careful to select verbs that most effectively convey the meaning they seek to create.

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