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# Directed Learning Activity

Editing out “To Be” Verbs

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Student Name: | Date: |
| Instructor: | Course: |

***Important Note***

# About This DLA

All the activities (4) in the DLA must be completed in their entirety before receiving credit for completion. Students are welcome to meet with a tutor if they need help, but please be aware that students might need a second appointment for review and Tutoring Session Response (TSR) in that case. If your instructor wants evidence of this completed DLA, return the TSR that indicates a checked “completed the DLA” box.

## Learning Outcomes

Through computer and other independent work, this activity will familiarize you with the forms of “to

be” and how to revise them out of your writing. Upon the successful completion of this DLA, you will be able to identify the different forms of “to be” and choose more descriptive verbs.

## Activities (approximately 1 hour)

Read the information, complete the activities that follow, and be prepared to discuss your answers when you meet with a tutor.

# The Forms of “To Be”

Before we move on to any activities, you should know all eight forms of “to be”: *am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been*. This will help you begin to recognize them in your own writing. The chart below lists all forms of “to be” to look out for.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Case** | **Present forms of “to be”** | **Past forms of “to be”** |
| I | *Am* | *Was* |
| She, He, It | *Is* | *Was* |
| They, We | *Are* | *Were* |
| You | *Are* | *Were* |
| Other Forms of “To Be” | *Be, Being* | *Been* |

# Why Do We Use “To Be” So Often?

Unknowingly, writers over-rely on “to be” verbs because some of our most common sentence construction techniques rely upon them. These have made “to be” verbs some of the most commonly used verbs in English. However, because “to be” is a static verb, showing no action, it is easy to use but adds very little to a writer’s sentences. Look at how many ways we use “to be”:

1. Using “to be” verbs links subjects to adjectives easily (but vaguely): *He is a handsome man. (What about him is handsome?)*
2. Progressive tenses require the use of “to be”: *The student was working on his essay for six hours last night.*
3. Passive voice\* requires the use of “to be”: *Votes were collected last week for presidential elections. (Who collected these votes?)*

*\*For additional help on the passive voice, see the Passive Voice DLA.*

1. Contractions often “hide” the use of “to be” verbs so we may not notice them: *She’s (she is) a wonderful volunteer at the animal shelter. (See number one above.)*

# Why Should We Avoid “To Be”?

First, not all use of “to be” verbs is forbidden. Sometimes our writing may require it. For example, if the present progressive is the best verb tense to use in a sentence you are writing, then use it. Or, maybe you do not have a subject and, therefore, must use passive voice.

However, often a simple past or present tense verb does the same job in fewer words and with more impact. And often you can change passive to active voice. Other times, you can take a noun and use it in its verb form.

What is the point of all this? “To be” verbs zap your sentences of detail and liveliness, and unfortunately, writers often over-rely on these verbs. When we put a bunch of dull verbs together in an entire essay, this can make for quite a snooze fest for your readers. Take a look at these examples:

**Weak:** Mt. SAC students were provided helpful resources in the Student Center.

**Strong:** The Student Center provided helpful resources to Mt. SAC students.

**Weak:** President George Bell was the speaker at the first Mt. SAC graduation in 1947.

**Strong:** President George Bell spoke at the first Mt. SAC graduation in 1947.

**Weak:** Mt. SAC is located on previous Gabrielino-Tongva Indian Tribe land and opened as a new college in 1946.

**Strong:** Mt. SAC, located on previous Gabrielino-Tongva Indian Tribe land, opened as a new college in 1946.

# How Do I Edit out “To Be” Verbs from My Writing?

Learning to edit out “to be” verbs, like anything else, requires a bit of focus and attention to detail. First, circle or highlight all forms of “to be” in your writing. Though it may seem tedious, it allows you to see how often you use these verbs and choose better verbs when possible. In time, your brain will begin selecting active verbs more often, and this process becomes easier.

**Once you have discovered your “to be” verbs, consider the following revision techniques.**

1. Think of another verb that relates to the content of the sentence. (Use a dictionary or thesaurus for help discovering new vocabulary words).

**Weak:** Mt. SACis located in Walnut, California.

**Strong:** Mt. SAC calls the city of Walnut, California its home.

1. Look for a word in the sentence that can be changed into the main verb. **Weak:** The college’s first tenured staff was responsible for creating a new college that would begin classes in the fall of 1946.

**Strong:** The college’s first tenured staff created a new college that would begin classes in the fall of 1946.

1. If the “to be” verb only links a subject and adjective, omit the “to be” verb, place the adjective next to the noun, and connect this phrase to another sentence.

**Weak:** He is impatient. It would be hard for him to wait in long lines at the DMV.

**Strong:** The impatient man can’t wait in long lines at the DMV.

1. Change passive voice to active voice.

**Weak:** Students are taught skills for success by faculty and counselors at Mt. SAC.

**Strong:** Mt. SAC faculty and counselors teach skills for success to students.

1. Eliminate repeated words, phrases, or ideas by creating appositives.

**Weak:** Nicole taught Joyce how to create a website. Luckily, Nicole is an expert at web design.

**Strong:** Nicole, an expert at web design, taught Joyce how to create a website.

1. Restructure the sentence by creating a phrase that will eliminate the “to be” verb.

**Weak:** Tristahad planned to be on vacation this week, but the tropical storm changed her plans.

**Strong:** The tropical storm changed Trista’s vacation plans this week.

**Strong:** The tropical storm began last week, ruining Trista’s vacation plans.

# Activities

Check off each box once you have completed the activity.

## 1. Answer the Questions

Review the information above on editing out the “to be” verb. Then answer the following questions.

* 1. List the eight forms of “to be.”
  2. Why should writers avoid the use of “to be” verbs?

2. Rewrite Sentences

Rewrite the following sentences, editing out the “to be” verbs. Make sure to review the techniques discussed earlier. Some sentences may have more than one form of “to be.”

1. The restaurant’s food is excellent.
2. There are not enough parking spaces on campus and those that are available are too cramped.
3. It is my intention to transfer to a four-year university.
4. There were some important lessons that resulted from the emergency evacuation training.
5. The concept of immortality was intriguing to his philosophy students.

Choose 3a or 3b Below

* ***3a. Rewrite Sentences from Your Own Writing***

Take out one of your essays. Choose a paragraph and circle or highlight all forms of “to be.” Then rewrite the sentences on a Word document or sheet of paper, editing out the “to be” verbs.

**If you do not have your own writing samples to work with, please complete the supplemental activity below (4b).**

## 3b. Rewrite Sentences from the Excerpts Below

**Read** through the excerpts below from the article “Woman’s plea after dogs are attacked” by Nicola Robinson **and circle or highlight** all forms of “to be.” Then **revise** the sentences editing out the forms of “to be” on another sheet of paper or Word document.

A Tamworth woman is appealing for information after her two rescue dogs were viciously attacked by another animal – leaving one needing surgery. Fortunately, Ms. Jones’ cries were heard by her neighbors who rushed to her aid. But as soon as Pepper was freed, the dog then “clamped down” on Bertie’s neck.

Ms. Jones needed stitches in her left hand. Bertie suffered deep wounds to the neck and had to have eight stitches and undergo an operation, while Pepper suffered cuts to her leg. Both dogs have been prescribed antibiotics and pain killers and the drama meant Ms. Jones was forced to cancel her plans to spend Christmas Day in Yorkshire.

Anyone with information about the dog – described as tan colored and possibly a staffie-American bulldog cross – or its owner, who was also walking a smaller black dog, is urged to contact Staffordshire Police by calling 101, quoting the incident number 817 of December 21.

## 5. Review the DLA

Go to https://mtsac.edu/writingcenter and use the [EAB Navigate Appointment System](https://mtsac.campus.eab.com/) to make a DLA appointment. During your session with a tutor, explain why we should avoid “to be verbs” and the main techniques to revise them. Refer to your own graded writing (or the completed activity) and explain to the tutor strategies that you used to edit your sentences. Consider the main concept you learned in this DLA. How will knowledge of these concepts affect your writing?

**Sign-off procedure:**

* **Attach TSR (Tutoring Session Response) to your DLA. There will be a check box that the tutor will select to indicate that you have completed the DLA or that the DLA is still in-progress.**

*If you are an individual with a disability and need a greater level of accessibility for any document in The Writing Center or on The Writing Center’s website, please contact the Mt. SAC Accessible Resource Centers for Students,* [access@mtsac.edu*,*](mailto:access@mtsac.edu) *(909) 274-4290.*

(Credits: Cole, Lois. “Editing out the Boring, Lazy ‘To Be’ Verb.”)