**AP Language**

**Eliminating “To Be” Verbs**

In order to dig down deep and revise initial drafts, reduce the number of “to be verbs”: *is, am, are, was, were, be, being,*and *been*.

Before you mutter a snide, rhetorical question, *Didn’t Shakespeare say “To be, or not to be: that is the question:”? He used three “to be” verbs right there! If it’s good enough for Shakespeare, it’s good enough for me,* remember Shakespeare used only six more “to be” verbs in Hamlet’s next 34 lines.

Your goal is to reduce, not eliminate the “to be” verbs in order to write with greater precision and purpose. There. I just used a “to be” verb. Feeling better?

**What’s So Wrong with “To Be” Verbs?**

1. The “to be” verbs: *is, am, are, was, were, be, being, been* are state of being verbs, which means that **they unduly claim a degree of permanence**. For example, “I am hungry.” For most Americans, hunger is only a temporary condition.
2. The “to be” verbs **claim absolute truth and exclude other views**. “Classical music is very sophisticated.” Few would agree that all classical compositions are always sophisticated.
3. The “to be” verbs are **general and lack specificity**. A mother may tell her child, “Be good at school today.” The more specific “Don’t talk when the teacher talks today” would probably work better.
4. The “to be” verbs are **vague**. For example, “That school is great.” Clarify the sentence as “That school has wonderful teachers, terrific students, and supportive parents.”
5. The “to be” verbs **often confuse the reader about the subject of the sentence**. For example, “It was nice of you to visit.” Who or what is the “It?”

Adapted from Ken Ward’s E-Prime article at <http://www.trans4mind.com/personal_development/GeneralSemantics/KensEPrime.htm>

**When Can We Use “To Be” Verbs?**

It’s not that “to be” verbs are always bad; sometimes writers must use “to be” verbs to communicate exactly what the writer wants to say. In fact, these verb forms can be difficult to replace. When the verb links to the subject (the do-er) of the sentence as a state of being, it performs one of these five functions:

1. **Exists**−Is there any trouble? Yes, I am he (predicate nominative).
2. **Happens**−The meetings are over.
3. **Locates**−He was at the birthday party.
4. **Identifies**−Those children were friendly (predicate adjective).
5. **Describes**−That could be scary (helping verb)! He is being helpful (progressive tense). Those girls have been so mean (perfect tense).

Generally, writers should avoid using “to be” verbs in essays. “To be” verbs can appear more frequently in narrative writing. However, when writers can replace a “to be” verb with a vivid, “show me” verb in any writing genre, it certainly makes sense to do so. With a good “show me” verb, the reader (or listener) can picture the physical or mental action of the verb. The verb engages the interest of the reader and specifically communicates the nature of the action. But, not all non-“to be” verbs are vivid, “show me” verbs. For example, the physical and mental action verbs in this sentence do not use vivid, “show me” verbs: The boy sits down on the bench and thinks what to do next. In contrast, the physical and mental action verbs in this sentence do use vivid, “show me” verbs: The boy slouches down on the bench and studies what to do next.

So, how can we get our students to reduce or eliminate “to be” verbs in their essays to create precision of meaning, specificity, clarity, and just good old sentence variety? How do we get our students to use these vivid “show me” verbs instead? Try these five strategies:

**How to Eliminate “To Be” Verbs**

1. **Identify**− Memorize the “to be” verbs to avoid using them and to revise those used in essays: is, am, are, was, were, be, being, been. Self-edit by circling “to be” verbs in the revision stage of writing. Problem-solve whether a “to be” verb is necessary or not.
2. **Substitute**−Sometimes a good replacement of a “to be” verb just pops into the brain. For example, instead of “That cherry pie is delicious,” substitute the “to be” verb is with tastes as in “That cherry pie tastes delicious.” Also, substitute the “there,” “here,” and “it” + “to be” verbs. For example, instead of “There is the cake, and here are the pies for dessert, and it is served by Mom,” replace with “Mom serves the cake and pies for dessert.” Let’s also add on the “this,” “that,” “these,” and “those” + “to be” verbs. Finally, strong linking verbs can replace “to be” verbs. For example, instead of “That was still the best choice,” substitute the “to be” verb was with the linking verb remained as in “That remained the best choice.”
3. **Convert**− Start the sentence differently to see if this helps eliminate a “to be” verb. For example, instead of “Charles Schulz was the creator of the Peanuts cartoon strip,” convert the common noun creator to the verb created as in “Charles Schulz created the Peanuts cartoon strip.”
4. **Change**−To eliminate a “to be” verb, change the subject of the sentence to another noun or pronoun in the sentence and rearrange the order of the sentence. For example, instead of “The car was stopped by a police officer,” change the complete subject, the car, to a police officer to write “A police officer stopped the car.” Also, add in a different sentence subject to eliminate a “to be” verb. For example, instead of “The books were written in Latin,” add in a different sentence subject, such as “authors” to change the passive voice to the active voice and write “Authors wrote the books in Latin.”  Lastly, starting the sentence with a different word or part of speech will help eliminate the “to be” verb. For example, instead of “The monster was in the dark tunnel creeping,” rearrange as “Down the dark tunnel crept the monster.”
5. **Combine**−Look at the sentences before and after the one with the “to be” verb to see if combining the sentences will eliminate the “to be” verb. For example, instead of “The child was sad. The sensitive child was feeling that way because of the news story,” combine as “The news story saddened the sensitive child.”

