

Writers' Workshop

Putting Your Writing on a To Be-Free Diet

In this Writers' Workshop you will:

- Learn to recognize and avoid forms of *to be* verbs.

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Mini-Lesson: Identifying To Be Verbs

The verb *to be*, the most complicated of all English verbs, takes many forms.

Apply It!

Despite their weakness, *to be* verbs do serve important purposes. Highlight *to be* verbs on the front page of a quality professional publication. With your group, discuss whether each *to be* verb is a strong choice. Where the use is strong, discuss why it is the best choice. List ways these verbs can serve a journalist.

Do the same for a student publication. Are *to be* verbs more frequent in student publications?

Person and number	Simple present	Simple past	Simple future	Present perfect*
	Present progressive	Past progressive	Future progressive	Present perfect progressive*
First person singular (I)	Am Am being	was was being	will be will be being As in "I will be being good when Santa comes."	have been have been being
First person plural (we)	Are Are being	were were being	will be will be being	have been have been being
Second person singular and plural (you/you all)	Are are being	were were being	will be will be being	have been have been being
Third person singular (he, she, it)	is is being	was was being	will be will be being	have been have been being
Third person plural (they)	are are being	were were being	will be will be being	have been have been being
With auxiliary verbs can, could, should, would, may, might, must, has to, had to, et al. The tense and number is shown by the auxiliary verb.	Can be Can be being	Could be Could be being	Auxiliary verbs rarely or never are used in the future tense.	Could have been Could have been being

*Substitute had for have to make the past perfect and the past perfect progressive.

Mini-Lesson: Identifying To Be Verbs Using Passive Voice

The passive voice consists of a form of the verb *to be*, plus the past participial form of an action verb, such as *thrown*. Passive constructions change that which receives the action of the verb, in this case, a ball, into the subject. Passive constructions eliminate the actor, in this case Jimmy, or place it in a prepositional phrase, in this case by Jimmy.

Note the difference between the present participle *throwing*, part of an active verb in the progressive tenses (*He is throwing the ball*) and the past participle *thrown*, part of the passive voice (*The ball is thrown by him*).

The passive voice places emphasis on that which receives the action of the verb—the ball. Passives, longer and less dynamic than active sentences, usually interest the reader less.

Apply It!

1. Examine your own writing for passive constructions. In each case, decide if the passive is the best choice.
2. Since this Writers' Workshop asks you to avoid **all** forms of *to be* verbs, rewrite at least ten passive sentences (from any of your sources)

Tense	Active Voice	Passive Voice
Simple present	Jimmy throws a ball.	A ball is thrown. Or A ball is thrown by Jimmy.
Present progressive	Jimmy is throwing a ball.	A ball is being thrown. Or A ball is being thrown by Jimmy.
Present perfect	Jimmy has thrown a ball.	A ball has been thrown. Or A ball has been thrown by Jimmy.
Present perfect progressive	Jimmy has been throwing a ball.	A ball has been thrown. Or A ball has been thrown by Jimmy
Simple past	Jimmy threw a ball.	A ball was thrown. Or A ball was thrown by Jimmy.
Past progress	Jimmy was throwing a ball.	A ball was being thrown. Or A ball was being thrown by Jimmy.
Past perfect	Jimmy had thrown a ball.	A ball had been thrown. Or A ball had been thrown by Jimmy.
Past perfect progressive	Jimmy had been throwing	A ball had been thrown. Or A ball had been thrown by Jimmy.
Simple future	Jimmy will throw a ball.	A ball will be thrown. Or A ball will be thrown by Jimmy.
Future progressive	Jimmy will be throwing a ball.	A ball will be thrown. Or A ball will be thrown by Jimmy.
Future perfect	Jimmy will have thrown a ball.	A ball will have been thrown. Or A ball will have been thrown by Jimmy.
Future perfect progressive	Jimmy will have been throwing a ball.	A ball will have been thrown. Or A ball will have been thrown by Jimmy.
With an auxiliary verb	Jimmy can throw a ball. (could, should, would, may, might, must, has to, had to, etc.)	A ball can be thrown (by Jimmy).

as active sentences, with a *who* doing a *what*. When the active form requires you to add missing information, underline the part that is fiction. If necessary, completely rewrite the passive sentence.

For instance, these sentences with the passive verbs *will be held* and *will be sold*

"Compassionate Eating: Healthy Foods From Around the Globe" will be held in the quad during lunch Thursday. Non-animal-based dishes will be sold. (22 words)

could be rewritten with the active verbs *will offer* and *can buy*.

Vegan Club will sponsor "Compassionate Eating: Healthy Foods From Around the Globe" in the quad at lunch Thursday where Trojans can buy non-animal-based dishes. (24 words, more information)

Read each of your 10 passive sentences and your revised sentences aloud, one by one, taking turns with the rest of your response group. Ask your responders the following questions about your revised sentence (and any other questions you think appropriate):

- Is everything in the right order to make sense?
- Is the active sentence more informative? Significantly more informative?
- What can I cut?
- What should I add?
- What can I make clearer?
- Is the emphasis on the wrong information in my active sentence?
- If the active sentence is longer than the passive: Is the extra information important enough to justify the longer, active sentence?
- Which sentence is better, the active or the passive?
- Revise as appropriate.