

The

Writer's

Diet

*Helen
Sword*

Who says nutritious material must be bland? This short book is packed with excellent advice on writing, offered with charm and good cheer.

– **Steven Pinker**, Johnstone Professor of Psychology, Harvard University, and author of *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*.

Is your writing flabby or fit? If your sentences are weighed down with passives and prepositions, be-verbs and waste words, *The Writer's Diet* is for you. This book will help you energise your writing and strip unnecessary padding from your prose.

The Writer's Diet offers a short, sharp introduction to great writing. Through the online test at www.writersdiet.com and the analysis and examples in this book, Helen Sword teaches writers of all kinds – students to teachers, lawyers to librarians – how to transform flabby sentences into active, energetic prose.

First published in 2007, *The Writer's Diet* became a bestselling handbook and now returns refreshed alongside a new version of www.writersdiet.com. The book will highlight your bad habits and sharpen your style – for clearer, crisper sentences filled with words that count.

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Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction: The Writer's Diet	1
1. Verbal verve	5
2. Noun density	17
3. Prepositional podge	29
4. Ad-dictions	39
5. Waste words	49
Afterword: Healthy writing	63
Appendix: The WritersDiet Test	67
References	74
Index	77

1.

Verbal verve

Key principles in this chapter:

- Favour strong, specific, robust action verbs (*scrutinise, dissect, recount, capture*) over weak, vague, lazy ones (*have, do, show*).
- Limit your use of *be*-verbs (*is, am, are, was, were, be, being, been*)

Verbs power our sentences as surely as muscles propel our bodies. In fact, a sentence is not technically a sentence unless it contains a verb. Not all verbs pack the same punch, however. Active verbs such as *grow, fling* and *exhale* infuse your writing with vigour and metaphorical zing; they put legs on your prose. Forms of the verbs *to be* – for example *is, was, are* – do their duty too, but they carry you nowhere new. Think of them as the gluteus maximus of your grammatical anatomy.

It is much easier to write a sentence that is dominated by *be*-verbs and passive constructions – such as the one you are reading right

THE WRITER'S DIET

now – than to summon the energy to construct action-driven prose. After all, why waste time ferreting through your brain in search of varied, vivid verbs if that good old standby *is* will serve your sentences just as well?

Active verbs merit effort and attention for at least three reasons. First, they supply a sense of agency and urgency to your writing by telling you who did what to whom. A scientist's passive locution, 'The research was performed', lacks the honesty and directness of 'We performed the research'.

Second, active verbs add force and complexity to otherwise static sentences. When you write, 'The pandemic swept through South America', you implicitly liken the pandemic's effect to that of a fire sweeping through a forest or a broom sweeping clear a cluttered floor. 'The pandemic was very serious' simply doesn't spark our imagination in the same way.

Third, active verbs demand economy and precision, whereas *be*-verbs invite sloppy syntax. Consider this flaccid sentence by a philosophy student:

What is interesting about viruses is that their genetic stock is very meagre.

A light workout – including the addition of a stronger verb and a fresh adverb – renders the sentence at once stronger and livelier:

Viruses originate from a surprisingly meagre genetic stock.

In sum, *be*-verbs function much like equal signs in a mathematical equation; rather than shifting a sentence into new territory, they describe the status quo. In a passive verb construction, a *be*-verb neutralises an active verb like a spider trapping a honeybee: 'He *was startled* by the

VERBAL VERVE

bell'; 'Her face *was lined* with wrinkles'. Note how, in these sentences, the action words lose their status as verbs and take on the role of descriptive adjectives (*startled*, *lined*) instead.

When used in moderation, there's nothing wrong with *be*-verbs. We need *is* in our sentences just as we need starch in our diet and socks in our wardrobe. Forms of *be* can help us create subtle distinctions of agency, action and tense; for example, 'I was made to feel inferior' means something quite different from 'She made me feel inferior' or 'I felt inferior'. Likewise, 'He is going shopping' suggests a different temporality than 'He goes shopping' or 'He shops every day'.

Be-verbs become problematic only when we grow lazy: when *is* and *are* become the main staples of every sentence simply because we cannot be bothered to vary our verbs. The following excerpt from an undergraduate essay on cinematography offers a case in point:

American Beauty is one of the best films I have ever seen. The Academy gave the movie a 'Picture of the Year' award, among other honors. There are many good uses of cinematography throughout the film. I will be describing how cinematography is used to enhance what is happening in that particular scene.

Be-verbs (*is*, *are*, *be*) make up nearly 10% of the words in this passage. Two potentially active verbs, *describe* and *happen*, suffer from the weakening addition of *-ing*, which necessitates an accompanying form of *be* ('will *be* describing', 'what *is* happening'). Meanwhile, the only remaining active verbs – *see*, *give*, *use*, *enhance* – prove so bland and generic that they contribute little more energy than *is* and *are*. When we strip away the *be*-verbs from the final sentence – 'I will *be* describing how cinematography *is* used to enhance what *is* happening in that particular scene' – we reveal the core sentence that lurks beneath:

Exercises

The following exercises will stretch and tone your verbal muscles. Feel free to concoct your own variations.

From passive to active

Identify five sentences that employ the passive voice – either in your own writing or in someone else’s work – and turn them into active sentences that contain no forms of *be*. In doing so, you might have to furnish new verbs or even rephrase entire sentences.

Example: The passengers **were asked** to return to their seats.

Who asked the passengers to return to their seats? To render this sentence active, we need to identify the agent who performs the action. Try out some different possibilities and attend to their nuances:

- The flight attendant **asked** the passengers to return to their seats.
- The captain **told** the passengers to return to their seats.
- The voice on the loudspeaker **ordered** the passengers to return to their seats.

Nearly all good writers employ the passive voice occasionally: for instance, to emphasise the initial noun in a sentence (‘His face had been scarred by the experiences of a lifetime’), to avoid an intrusive ‘I’ (‘The book and the test have been designed to work together’) or to enact a character’s powerlessness (‘his hands cut off, his tongue torn out with pincers, his body burned alive’). But sometimes the mere exercise of shifting to the active voice can lead to unexpected insights. For example, ‘The students *were taught*’ takes on quite a different meaning when you write instead, ‘The teacher *instructed* the students’ or ‘The students *learned*’.

From lazy to lively

Select a short sample of your writing – a paragraph or a page – and identify all the verbs. Once you have eliminated the forms of *be*, what verbs remain? Many so-called ‘active’ verbs – words like *make*, *do* and *use* – convey no specific sense of action. Can you liven up your prose by replacing bland, predictable verbs with more precise, energetic alternatives?

Example: Many people in Russia **have** no skills in Internet usage. Those people **include** the young as well as the older generations.

By the time we have finished reading these opening lines from an undergraduate essay on Internet use in Russia, we are already nodding off. Rather than merely replacing *have* with *possess* – the lazy option, rather like substituting *utilise* for *use* – let’s try *lack*, a verb that emphasises absence and deficiency. Next, we can fold the two sentences together:

Many people in Russia – the young as well as the older generations – **lack** Internet skills.

Why do the Russians lack Internet skills? Will this situation lead to adverse social and educational consequences? The new opening sentence makes us want to keep reading to find out the answers to these questions.

Energy bars for the brain

Set a timer for five minutes and write down all the active verbs you can think of. Allow your mind to wander, romp and play. Keep your list of interesting verbs on hand whenever you sit down to write, and add to it as new ones occur to you. Like energy bars for an athlete, your stash of ‘verbs with verve’ will supply needed fuel when your verbal energy begins to flag.

WritersDiet Test example 1

In this article I am going to distinguish different levels of social practice and psychic subjectification within which it is possible to describe shifts in the regulation of gender. The more abstract level of my argument is that it is helpful to maintain a distinction between changes in the codes regulating practices within social fields, and changes at the level of gender as a primary mark of human subjectivity within the Symbolic Order. At a more concrete level, I am arguing that, while it is possible to identify gendered shifts in the codification of disciplinary and pedagogic practices within universities, the subjectivity of individual academics is still primarily embodied within the codes of hegemonic heterosexual gender identities.⁹

WritersDiet fitness ratings:

verbs	Heart attack
nouns	Heart attack
prepositions	Heart attack
adjectives/adverbs	Heart attack
it, this, that, there	Flabby
Overall	Heart attack

Comments: *Be*-verbs, abstract nouns and academic adjectives dominate this unwieldy passage from a peer-reviewed higher education journal. Abstract verbs such as *distinguish*, *describe*, *maintain*, *argue* and *identify* fail to perk things up much. The third sentence promisingly begins, ‘At a more concrete level . . .’. However, no concrete images or examples reveal themselves here.

2.

Noun density

Key principles in this chapter:

- Anchor abstract ideas in concrete language and images.
- Illustrate abstract concepts using real-life examples. ('Show, don't tell.')
- Limit your use of abstract nouns, especially nominalisations (nouns that have been formed from verbs, adjectives or other nouns).

If verbs function as the muscles of language, nouns form its bones. Sentences with 'strong bones' convey meaning and emotion through concrete nouns, which describe objects we can see, hear, touch, taste or smell, such as *water*, *hands* or *moon*. Sentences with 'weak bones' rely mostly on abstract nouns, which express intangible ideas remote from the world of the human senses. We can talk and think and argue about *sadness* and *affection* and *reciprocity*, but these concepts bear no physical weight.

Exercises

These exercises will sharpen your sensibility for concrete language and build up the noun density of your prose.

Grammatical forensics

Make a list of abstract nouns that carry the nominalising suffixes *ion*, *ism*, *ty*, *ment*, *ness*, *ance* or *ence*. Next, identify the grammatical root stock on which each of these nouns grows. In most cases, you will find that the noun stems from a verb, an adjective or both.

Examples:

- **participation** (noun) → **participate** (verb)
- **conservatism** (noun) → **conservative** (adjective) → **conserve** (verb)
- **activity** (noun) → **active** (adjective) → **act** (verb/noun)
- **engagement** (noun) → **engage** (verb)
- **surveillance** (noun) → **survey** (verb)
- **excellence** (noun) → **excellent** (adjective) → **excel** (verb)

Now write a sentence that contains two or more of the abstract nouns on your list.

Example: The children demonstrated their **engagement** through their **participation** in a range of **activities**.

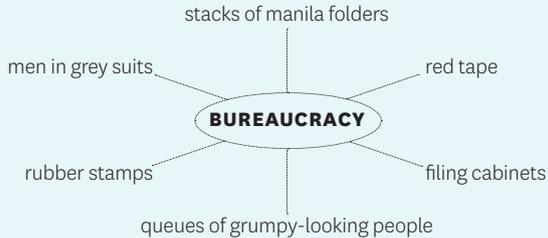
Experiment with ways of communicating the same information more concretely, whether by converting some of the nouns to verbs or adjectives or by replacing abstract language with concrete examples:

- The children engaged in many different activities.
- The children played games, sang songs and told stories.

Abstract to concrete and back again

On a blank sheet of paper, write an abstract noun and draw an oval around it, adding six or more radiating spokes. At the end of each spoke, write a concrete image that exemplifies the abstract noun in the centre.

Example:



Now repeat the exercise, placing a concrete noun in the centre and abstract nouns at the spoke ends.

Example:



Just about any idea or emotion can be illustrated using concrete images. Likewise, a single concrete noun can invoke a surprisingly complex range of abstractions. Good writers exploit the relationship between concrete and abstract language by remaining attentive to the subtleties of both.

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