

To Be or Not To Be



Presented with help from *Who's (...oops!) Whose Grammar Book Is This Anyway?* by C. Edward Good

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What is one simple trick that you can do today to improve your writing?

Try using fewer forms of the verb *to be*!

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An example from the law:

The “hearsay rule” – From a brief submitted to a federal court

The reason for excluding business records from the hearsay rule **is** their circumstantial guarantee of trustworthiness. If a business **is to be** successful, there **must be** accurate records on which it can rely to carry out its activities.

In the instant case, Exhibit A **is** a profit and loss statement. The making of a profit **was** a key consideration of the Benevolent Society in holding these bake sales. This document **was** prepared to record the result of the sale. The trustworthiness of Exhibit A **is** ensured by its intended usage by the Benevolent Society. It **is** respondent’s position that Rule 803(6) **is** applicable and Exhibit A **is** admissible.

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Eight forms of the verb *to be*

- am
- is
- are
- was
- This includes contractions:
 - I’m
 - it’s
 - there’s
- were
- be
- being
- been

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Do you do this?

- Let’s count how many times you used the verb *to be* in the second paragraph of your last writing assignment...
 - am
 - is
 - are
 - was
 - were
 - be
 - being
 - been

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Fixing the problem

- Determine how you use these words and see if you can say the same thing more **clearly** and **vividly** with **action verbs**

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Fixing the problem:

Show *being* through *doing*

- Ask: Who or what does what to whom or what?
- Show what something *is* by what it *does*
- Q: If you do this will your writing **be** better?
- A: Yes, but your writing will also **improve!**

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Fixing the problem:

Bring the actor back into the writing

- No one populates this sentence:
 - There **are** only a few scholarly articles that have addressed this issue.
- Bring back the actors:
 - Only a **few scholars** have addressed this issue.

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Fixing the problem:

Let ideas *act*

- Oliver Wendell Holmes once wrote:
 - "And we now have to consider whether the cautious statement in the former case **marked** the limit of the law."
- Can a statement literally **mark** a limit of the law?
- No...but note the figurative image Holmes achieved by using the action verb

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Fixing the problem:

Use linking verbs

- Linking verbs include the sense verbs:
 - *looks, sounds, feels, smells, and tastes*
- Other verbs:
 - *appears, becomes, continues, grows, proves, remains, seems, etc.*
- These verbs link to adjectives, nouns, or adverbial phrases
 - He looks awful. (adjective)
 - She feels bad. (adjective)
 - She seems an honest woman. (noun)
 - The document appears in the appendix. (adverbial phrase)

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Fixing the problem:

Use linking verbs

- Example:
 - The committee **was adamant in its refusal** to change its decision.
- Try:
 - The committee **remained adamant** and declined to change its decision.
- This example can work without a linking verb too:
 - The committee **adamantly refused** to change its decision.

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Fixing the problem: Edit out “nouniness”

- Example:
 - The senator **was** hesitant.
 - There **was** a conclusion to the case.
- These nouns are stuffy and weak and bury the more powerful verb
- By removing these nouns, you also destroy many *be*'s
- Instead of:
 - The meeting **was** because of our desire for the achievement of the improvement of our mutual understanding.
- Try:
 - We **met** because we **wanted** to **understand** each other better.

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Fixing the problem: Use intransitive verbs

- Intransitive action verbs show motion or location of a person or thing
- Instead of:
 - The pulse **is then divided** and **is switched** to two circuits.
- Try:
 - The pulse **then splits** and **moves** to two circuits.
- You have hundreds of choices!
 - *stands, serves, moves, enters, leaves, remains, moves, stays, lies, proceeds, etc.*

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Fixing the problem: Fake it

- Instead of writing:
 - The event **was** before the deadline.
- Try:
 - The event **preceded** the deadline.

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Revisiting the “hearsay rule” The writer can obliterate all 11 *be*'s

The law of evidence **excludes** business records from the hearsay rule because they **guarantee** a certain minimum level of trustworthiness. **To succeed**, a business **must keep** accurate records of its daily business dealings, records **deemed** reliable by the business itself and by its customers, suppliers, and lenders.

In the current case, Exhibit A **amounts to** a typical profit-and-loss statement. **Motivated** by a desire **to raise** funds, the Benevolent Society **held** these annual bake sales and carefully **recorded** their financial results in the document now **called** Exhibit A. The Society **viewed** the document as a business document and **relied** on it to plan future sales. Thus, the finder of fact **may rely** on the document as trustworthy. As a result, under Rule 803(6), the court **should admit** Exhibit A as a valid exception to the hearsay rule.

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Kicking the Habit

- Avoid Cosmic Detachment
 - “When you find yourself struggling to express a complex...idea, remember to ask yourself [this] key question....: ‘Who is doing what to whom?’ Bring those living creatures into your writing—make them move around and do things to each other. Suddenly abstraction will evaporate, and your writing will come alive.”

Dean Richard Wydick in *Plain English for Lawyers*

- Show *doing*, not *being*!

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Try it for yourself

- Assignment
 - Write a 2–3 page story about anything you want
 - Use the third-person point of view
 - Write the story in the past tense
 - Never use any form of the verb *to be*
 - Due Tuesday, October 29 in class
 - Have fun!
- The University Writing Center **is** available for you
- Visit the University Writing Center

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