

Ian Fleming's verbs describe external action and adventure; Amy Tan's verbs capture internal action and emotion. But action can also be intellectual, in the force and power of an argument, as Albert Camus demonstrates in *The Rebel*:

The metaphysical rebel *protests* against the condition in which he *finds* himself as a man. The rebel slave *affirms* that there is something in him that will not *tolerate* the manner in which his master *treats* him; the metaphysical rebel *declares* that he is frustrated by the univers $\acute{e}$ .

Notice that even with all the active verbs in that passage, Camus does not pass on the passive when he needs it ("he is frustrated"), which brings us to the next tool.

#### WORKSHOP

1. Verbs fall into three categories: active, passive, and forms of the verb *to be*. Review your writing and circle verb forms with a pencil. In the margins, categorize each verb.
2. Convert passive and *to be* verbs into the active. For example, "It was her observation that" can become "She observed."
3. In your own work and in the newspaper, search for verb qualifiers and see what happens when you cut them.
4. Experiment with both voice and tense. Find a passage you have written in the active voice and in the past tense. Change the verbs to the present tense and consider the effect. Does it seem more immediate?
5. I described three uses of the active voice: to create outward action, to express inner or emotional action, and to energize an argument. Look for examples of all three in your reading and for opportunities to use them in your writing.

#### TOOL 4



### Be passive-aggressive.

*Use passive verbs to showcase the "victim" of action.*

So the gold standard for writing advice is this: use active verbs. Those three words have been uttered in countless writing workshops with such conviction that they must be gospel. But are they?

Check out that last paragraph. In the first clause, I use a form of the verb *to be*, in this case "is." In the next sentence, I use the passive voice: "have been uttered." In the final sentence, I resort to another form of *to be*, in this case "are." My point is that you can create acceptable prose, from time to time, without active verbs.

Why, then, does voice matter? It matters because of the different effects active, passive, and *to be* verbs have on the reader and listener. I'll call on John Steinbeck again to describe this true-life encounter in North Dakota (the emphasis is mine):

Presently I *saw* a man leaning on a two-strand barbed-wire fence, the wires fixed not to posts but to crooked tree limbs stuck in the ground. The man *wore* a dark hat, and jeans and long jacket washed palest blue with lighter places at knees and elbows. His pale eyes *were frosted* with sun glare and his lips scaly as snake-skin. A .22 rifle *leaned* against the fence beside him and on the ground *lay* a little heap of fur and feathers — rabbits and small

birds. I *pulled up* to speak to him, *saw* his eyes *wash over* Rocinante, *sweep up* the details, and then *retire* into their sockets. And I *found* I *had* nothing to say to him . . . so we simply *brooded* at each other. (from *Travels with Charley*)

I count thirteen verbs in that passage, twelve active and one passive, a ratio George Orwell would admire. The litany of active verbs heats up the scene, even though not much happens. The active verbs reveal who is doing what. The author sees a man. The man wears a hat. The author pulls up to talk with him. They brood at each other. Even inanimate objects perform action. The rifle leans against the fence. Dead animals lie on the ground.

Embedded in all that verbal activity is one splendid passive verb: “His pale eyes *were frosted* with sun glare.” Form follows function. The eyes, in real life, received the action of the sun, so the subject receives the action of the verb.

That’s the writing tool: use passive verbs to call attention to the receiver of the action. When columnist Jeff Elder described the extinction of an American species, the passenger pigeon, in the *Charlotte Observer*, he used passive verbs to paint the birds as victims: “Enormous roosts *were gassed* from trees. . . . They *were shipped* to market in rail car after rail car. . . . In one human generation, America’s most populous native bird *was wiped out*.” The birds do nothing. They are done unto.

The best writers make the best choices between active and passive. A few paragraphs from the one cited above, Steinbeck wrote, “The night was loaded with omens.” Steinbeck could have written, “Omens loaded the night,” but in that case the active voice would have been unfair to both the night and the omens, the meaning and the music of the sentence.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire uses the distinction between active and passive verbs to challenge an educational system that places the power of teachers over the needs of students. An oppressive educational system, he argues, is one in which:

- the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
- the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined.

In other words, an oppressive system is one in which the teacher is active and the students are passive.

A strong active verb can add dimension to the cloud created by some uses of the verb *to be*. Strunk and White provide a nifty example. “There were leaves all over the ground” becomes “Leaves covered the ground.” A four-word sentence outworks seven words.

In graduate school, Don Fry helped me see how my prose wilted under the weight of passive and *to be* verbs. Sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph began, “It is interesting to note that,” or, “There are those occasions when” — pompous in-directions bred by the quest for an advanced degree.

But there are sweet uses of *to be*, as Diane Ackerman demonstrates in defining one difference between men and women:

The purpose of ritual for men *is* to learn the rules of power and competition. . . . The purpose of ritual for women . . . *is* to learn how to make human connections. They *are* often more intimate and vulnerable with one another than they *are* with their men, and taking care of other women teaches them to take care of themselves. In these formal ways, men and women domesticate their emotional lives. But their strategies *are* different, their biological itineraries *are* different. His sperm needs to travel, her egg needs to settle down. *It’s* astonishing that they survive happily at all. (from *A Natural History of Love*)

“Domesticate” is a strong active verb. So is “needs” in the sentence about sperm and egg. But, mostly, the author uses the verb *to be*, what we once called — promiscuously — the copulative verb, to forge some daring intellectual connections.

Here, then, are your tools of thumb:

- Active verbs move the action and reveal the actors.
- Passive verbs emphasize the receiver, the victim.
- The verb *to be* links word and ideas.

These choices are not merely aesthetic. They can also be moral and political. In his essay “Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell describes the relationship between language abuse and political abuse, how corrupt leaders use the passive voice to obscure unspeakable truths and shroud responsibility for their actions. They say, “It must be admitted, now that the report has been reviewed, that mistakes were made,” rather than, “I read the report, and I admit I made a mistake.” Here’s a life tool: always apologize in the active voice.

### WORKSHOP

1. Read Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language,” and discuss his argument that the use of the passive voice contributes to the defense of the indefensible. As you listen to political speech, notice those occasions when politicians and other leaders use the passive voice to avoid responsibility for problems and mistakes.

2. Look for brilliant uses of the passive voice in the newspaper and in fiction. Conduct an imaginary debate with George Orwell in which you defend the passive.

3. Revise your passive and *to be* verbs into the active, and notice how the emphases in your sentences change. Pay attention to the changed connections — the cohesion — between one sentence and another. What additional revisions do these changes require?

4. The poet Donald Hall argues that active verbs can be too active, that they can lead to macho prose (“He crunched his fist into the Nazi’s jaw”) and cloying romanticism (“The horizon embraced the setting sun”). In your reading, look for examples of such overheated prose and imagine useful revisions.

### TOOL 5



### Watch those adverbs.

*Use them to change the meaning of the verb.*

The authors of the classic Tom Swift adventures for boys loved the exclamation point and the adverb. Consider this brief passage from *Tom Swift and His Great Searchlight*:

“Look!” suddenly exclaimed Ned. “There’s the agent now! . . . I’m going to speak to him!” impulsively declared Ned.

The exclamation point after “Look” should suffice to fire up the young reader, but the author adds “suddenly” and “exclaimed” for good measure. Time and again, the writer uses the adverb, not to change our understanding of the verb, but to intensify it. The silliness of this style led to a form of pun called the “Tom Swiftie,” in which the adverb conveys the punch line:

“I’m an artist,” he said easily.

“I need some pizza now,” he said crustily.

“I’m the Venus de Milo,” she said disarmingly.

“I dropped my toothpaste,” he said, crestfallen.

At their best, adverbs spice up a verb or adjective. At their worst, they express a meaning already contained in it:

The blast *completely* destroyed the church office.  
 The cheerleader gyrated *wildly* before the screaming fans.  
 The accident *totally* severed the boy's arm.  
 The spy peered *furtively* through the bushes.

Consider the effect of deleting the adverbs:

The blast destroyed the church office.  
 The cheerleader gyrated before the screaming fans.  
 The accident severed the boy's arm.  
 The spy peered through the bushes.

In each case, the deletion shortens the sentence, sharpens the point, and creates elbow room for the verb. Feel free to disagree.

A half-century after his death, Meyer Berger remains among the greatest stylists in the history of the *New York Times*. One of his last columns describes the care received in a Catholic hospital by an old blind violinist:

The staff talked with Sister Mary Fintan, who has charge of the hospital. With her consent they brought the old violin to Room 203. It had not been played for years, but Laurence Stroetz groped for it. His long white fingers stroked it. He tuned it, with some effort, and tightened the old bow. He lifted it to his chin and the lion's mane came down.

The vigor of verbs and the absence of adverbs mark Berger's prose. As the old man played "Ave Maria":

Black-clad and white-clad nuns moved lips in silent prayer. They choked up. The long years on the Bowery had not stolen Laurence Stroetz's touch. Blindness made his fingers stumble down to the violin bridge, but they recovered. The music died and the audience pattered applause. The old violinist bowed and his sunken cheeks creased in a smile.

How much better that "the audience pattered applause" than that it "applauded politely."

Adverbiage reflects the style of an immature writer, but the masters can bump their shins as well. In 1963 John Updike wrote a one-paragraph essay, "Beer Can," about the beauty of that sacred vessel before the invention of the pop-top. He reminisced about how suds once "foamed eagerly in the exultation of release." As I've read that sentence over the years, I've grown more impatient with "eagerly." It clogs the space between a great verb ("foamed") and a great noun ("exultation"), which personify the beer and tell us all we need to know about eagerness.

To understand the difference between a good adverb and a bad adverb, consider these two sentences: "She smiled happily" and "She smiled sadly." Which one works best? The first seems weak because "smiled" contains the meaning of "happily." On the other hand, "sadly" changes the meaning.

Author Kurt Vonnegut uses adverbs with the frequency of an appearance of Halley's comet. I had to read several pages of his book *Palm Sunday* before I found one. Invited to deliver a Sunday sermon, he concludes the homily, "I thank you for your sweetly faked attention." Once again, "sweetly" adjusts the meaning of "faked." Good adverb.

Remember the song "Killing Me Softly"? Good adverb. How about "Killing Me Fiercely"? Bad adverb.

Look also for weak verb-adverb combinations that you can revise with stronger verbs: "She went quickly down the stairs" can become "She dashed down the stairs." "He listened surreptitiously" can become "He eavesdropped." Give yourself a choice.

I conclude with a disclaimer: The wealthiest writer in the world is J. K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series. She loves adverbs, especially when describing speech. On two pages of her first book, I found these attributions:

"said Hermione timidly."  
 "said Hermione faintly."

“he said simply.”  
“said Hagrid grumpily.”  
“said Hagrid irritably.”

If you want to make more money than the Queen of England, maybe you should use more adverbs. If your aspirations, like mine, are more modest, use them sparingly.

#### WORKSHOP

1. Look through the newspaper for any word that ends with *-ly*. If it's an adverb, cross it out and read the new sentence aloud. Which version works better?
2. Do the same for your last three pieces of writing. Circle the adverbs, delete them, and decide if the new sentence is stronger or weaker.
3. Read through your adverbs again and mark those that modify the verb rather than intensify it.
4. Search for weak verb-adverb combinations. “He spoke softly” might become “He whispered” or “He mumbled.” If you come upon a weak combination, try a stronger verb to see if it improves the sentence.

#### TOOL 6



### Take it easy on the *-ings*.

*Prefer the simple present or past.*

An editor from *Newsday* told me the story of how he tried to help a reporter revise the top of a story. As often happens, the editor knew that the lead paragraph could be improved, but not how. As he walked down the hallway, story in hand, he looked up to see the Brobdingnagian figure of Jimmy Breslin, who agreed to take a peek at the problem.

“Too many *-ings*,” said the legendary columnist.  
“Too many whats?”  
“Too many *-ings*.”

Can a writer use too many words that end with *-ing*, and why should that be a problem?

To put it another way, why is “Wish and hope and think and pray” stronger than “Wishin’ and hopin’ and thinkin’ and prayin’”? With apologies to Dusty Springfield, the answer resides in the history of English as an inflected language. An *inflection* is an element we add to a word to change its meaning. For example, we add *-s* or *-es* to a noun to indicate the plural. Add *-s* or *-ed* to a verb, and we distinguish present action from the past.

Add *-ing* to a verb, and it takes on a progressive sense —

a happening, as in this 1935 description by Richard Wright of the wild celebration after a Joe Louis boxing victory (the emphasis is mine): “Then they began *stopping* street cars. Like a cyclone *sweeping* through a forest, they went through them, *shouting*, *stamping*.” The passage survives the weak verb “went through,” depending on a simile and those *-ing* words to create a sense of spontaneous action.

Consider this opening to the mystery novel *The Big Sleep*:

It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, mid October, with the sun not *shining* and a look of hard wet rain in the clearness of the foothills. I was *wearing* my powder-blue suit, with dark blue shirt, tie and display handkerchief, black brogues, black wool socks with dark blue clocks on them. I was neat, clean, shaved and sober, and I didn't care who knew it. I was everything the well-dressed private detective ought to be. I was *calling* on four million dollars.

Even though author Raymond Chandler uses the static “was” five times, he creates a sense of the present — the here and now — by the injection of *-ing* words.

So the writer should not worry about the occasional and strategic use of an *-ing* word, only its overuse when the simple present or past tense will suffice. Sometimes a single *-ing* creates the desired effect. In this passage from a biography of U.S. Senator Bob Dole, we learn of the care he received after a terrible war injury:

Bob held on, and made it through the operation. The fever disappeared and the other kidney worked, and by fall, they'd chipped away the whole cast. Now they *were trying* to get him out of bed. They hung his legs over the edge of the mattress, but it made him weak with fatigue. It took days to get him on his legs, and then he shook so, with the pain and the strangeness, they had to set him back in bed.

Using the simple past tense, Richard Ben Cramer creates a scene that is vivid, clear, and dramatic. There, in the middle, rests a single exception (“they were trying”) to describe immediate and continuous effort.

Let me attempt to write a paragraph with too many *-ings*:

*Suffering* under the strain of months of *withering* attacks, reservists stationed in Iraq are *complaining* to family members about the length of their tours of duty, and *lobbying* their congressional representatives about *bringing* more troops home soon.

There is nothing right or wrong about this sentence. It's just heavy on *-ings*, five of them, expressing a variety of syntactic forms:

- “Suffering” is a present participle, modifying “reservists.”
- “Withering” is an adjective, modifying “attacks.”
- “Complaining” and “lobbying” are progressive forms of verbs.
- “Bringing” is a gerund, a verb used as a noun.

Before I try to improve this passage, let me offer two reasons why *-ing* weakens a verb:

1. When I add *-ing*, I add a syllable to the word, which does not happen, in most cases, when I add *-s* or *-ed*. Let's take the verb *to trick*. First, I'll add *-s*, then *-ed*, giving me *tricks* and *tricked*. Neither change alters the root effect of the verb. *Tricking*, with its extra syllable, sounds like a different word.

2. The *-ing* words begin to resemble each other. Walking and running and cycling and swimming are all good forms of exercise, but I prefer to point out that my friend Kelly likes to walk, run, cycle, and swim.

What might a revised version of my Iraq passage look like? How about:

Reservists stationed in Iraq have suffered months of withering attacks. They have complained to family members about the lengths of their tours of duty and lobbied Congress to bring more troops home soon.

I cannot argue that this revision represents a significant improvement over the earlier version; it's perhaps a little cleaner and more direct. But now I know that this tool gives me choices I did not know I had. In the same way I test adverbs, I can now test my *-ings*.

Since I've learned this tool, I notice how I appreciate passages that are *-ing* lite. Listen to Kathleen Norris in *Dakota*:

Like many who have written about Dakota, I'm invigorated by the harsh beauty of the land and feel a need to tell the stories that come from its soil. *Writing* is a solitary act, and ideally, the Dakotas might seem to provide a writer with ample solitude and quiet. But the frantic social activity in small towns conspires to silence a person. There are far fewer people than jobs to fill. Someone must be found to lead the church choir or youth group, to bowl with the league, to coach a softball team or little league, to run a Chamber of Commerce or club committee. Many jobs are vital: the volunteer fire department and ambulance service, the domestic violence hotline, the food pantry. All too often a kind of Tom Sawyerism takes over, and makes of adult life a perpetual club. Imagine *spending* the rest of your life at summer camp.

In a paragraph of 151 words, Norris gives us only two *-ings*. Not too many.

#### WORKSHOP

1. Read your recent work. Circle any word that ends with *-ing*. What have you discovered? Do you use too many *-ings*?

2. If so, revise a few passages. See if you can knock off some *-ings*, using, instead, the simple present or past.
3. Notice the number of *-ings* in the work you admire.
4. If you come across a difficult passage to read or write, test it for *-ings*.