

# *DukeWrites* Enrichment Suite

## Verbs, part one

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Hello, I'm Beth Long, with the Thompson Writing Program. In this module, we'll talk about using verbs in a U.S. academic context. You might recognize some of the sample sentences we'll use, as some of them come from the journal *Deliberations*, the journal of first-year student writing. We'll be learning from previous Duke first-year writers.

When considering some factors that make academic writing effective in a U.S. context – such as clarity and being specific, and conciseness, verbs play an important role.

In this module we'll talk about strong verbs and the most common academic verb tenses. Using strong or active verbs can help make your writing clearer and more concise. So what are strong verbs and how can they make writing clearer and more concise?

Strong verbs are what we call active verbs – they show some sort of action rather than showing just existing or being. Generally we think of the verb “to be” and all of its forms as a weak verb – and the verb to be is often used in passive voice - as opposed to active voice.

Here are examples of Passive Voice versus Active Voice. In the first sentence the noun that is responsible for the action, “biting,” is the dog. However, the dog is not in the subject position, as you would expect it to be as the “actor” in the sentence.

The noun that is having something done to him (the boy) is in this position. The “to be” verb here weakens the action.

In the second sentence the dog is the “actor” – and is in the subject position. Also note that Active Voice commonly leads to more concise sentences.

Let's look at another example where strong verbs and active voice can add clarity. Our passive example sentence reads: This was deemed an acceptable way for blacks and whites to interact and it was believed to be advantageous for everyone involved.

Notice the verb “to be” with was – this was deemed - it was believed. As readers, we don't know who or what is responsible for the actions. Who deems or thinks it acceptable – who believes it was advantageous? The writer might know these things – but we don't. The writer could be more explicit by using active voice.

Okay, now let's change this sentence to active voice. It reads: Southerners deemed this an acceptable way for blacks and whites to interact and believed it to be advantageous for everyone involved.

By changing to active voice we now know who the actors are. It was Southerners who thought it acceptable and believed it was advantageous. We have a better understanding of the relationships of the groups involved.

Note that in U.S. academic writing although we generally prefer active voice, sometimes passive voice is appropriate and even acceptable or preferable.

Please pause to take Verbs Quiz 1.