

# *DukeWrites* Enrichment Suite

## Verbs, part two

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So, when might passive voice be appropriate and even preferable?

We might choose passive voice when we do not want to emphasize the actor – either because for some reason we don't want to associate someone with the action like in the first example, "Mistakes were made." – no one wants to take the blame – or we might not want to emphasize the "actor" when describing a process or procedure as in the second example. It could get redundant repeating "The researcher did this, the researcher did that..."

The passive sentence in the quiz you just took is an example of not needing to emphasize the actor in a methods section of a paper.

Another reason we might use passive voice is because we might want to emphasize the object in a sentence. In this example – the writer wants to place the emphasis on the new law – not the legislature – so the writer places the new law in the initial position.

Also, the new law may have been the focus of previous sentences and the writer is following the old information to new information sentence pattern.

So we've looked at how the weak verb "to be" and its forms are used in passive voice. Another way the weak verb "to be" is used is with weak subjects. These types of sentence constructions using the weak verb "to be" and tend to be less direct.

These two pairs of sentences show how choosing strong subjects can make sentences more direct and concise. Instead of "There is a problem environmental scientists are working to solve. It is...", you can simply just start with "Environmental scientists are working to solve the problem."

Instead of "There are inorganic materials that have shown promise" just simply start with "Some inorganic materials have shown promise..."

So we've talked about how strong verbs in active voice can make our sentences clear and more concise. Let's look at another way strong verbs can help make our sentences more concise.

Strong verbs also tend to be more specific/descriptive and are one word – as opposed to phrasal verbs. Phrasal verbs tend to be less formal so if you are striving for a formal academic tone, choose the single word verb.

Strong verbs also help us avoid something called “Nominalizations.” Nominalizations usually add wordiness to sentences.

A nominalization is when we use the noun form of a word in a sentence. Other cultures encourage the use of nominalizations; however, in U.S. academic writing, placing the action in verb form is commonly preferred.

Let’s look at a sample sentence from a popular Duke Writing Studio handout called clarity and conciseness. It’s found on the Writing Studio website.

In the first sentence, we see that the central verb in the sentence is “is,” a verb that doesn’t pack much punch. The sentence has lots of other actions much more interesting than being, but they’re not expressed as verbs: the nouns cause, failure, influence, and learning imply the verbs to cause, to fail, to influence, and to learn.

Letting verbs express actions usually makes sentences more dynamic, direct, clear, and concise. So avoiding nominalizations can help make your writing less wordy.

Please pause and take a short quiz about single verbs and nominalizations.