Verbs, Adjectives, and Adverbs

✓ Verbs

Verbs express action or a state of being. In descriptive writing, verbs can help the writer create images for the reader. These tips can help you use verbs effectively in your writing:

- Use strong, precise, vigorous verbs. Avoid overusing the “to be” verbs (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been). Avoid “nominalizing” verbs (turning a verb into a noun). The emphasis in descriptive writing is on creating vivid images through the use of strong, precise, and vigorous language.

  **Example:** I made the discovery there was a shortcut.

  *The sentence needlessly transforms a verb (“to discover”) into a noun (“the discovery”) and uses a “to be” verb (“was”). These language choices add wordiness to the writing without enhancing the image for the reader.*

  **Revision:** I discovered a shortcut.

  *Notice that the noun “discovery” has been changed into an active verb and the extraneous “to be” verb has been removed.*

- Use verbs in the active voice and avoid the passive voice. When using the active voice, the subject of the sentence is also the “doer” of the action; the passive voice, on the other hand, makes the subject the recipient of the action in the sentence. The active voice is more vital, interesting, and direct than passive voice.

  **Example:** The directions were given to the students by the teacher.

  *In this example, the “directions” receive the action from the verb. The actor in the sentence, the “teacher,” is passively placed at the end of the sentence. Notice how the subject of this sentence remains unclear?*

  **Revision:** The teacher gave the students the directions.

  *In this revision, it is now clear that the “teacher” is the actor.*

✓ Adjectives

Adjectives are descriptive words that describe, qualify, or modify the meaning of nouns and pronouns. Usually, adjectives appear before the noun or pronoun to which they refer (Ann uses an old radio), unless the noun and adjective are separated by a linking verb (The car is fast).

- Use adjectives to paint a vivid image of the nouns you use in your writing. Well-chosen adjectives will add spice to your writing.
Example: The customer ate pancakes.

In this example, the sentence fails to paint a very clear picture of the customer and what he or she is eating. Without additional modifiers, the reader will think, “So what?”

Revision: The famished customer ate sixteen fresh chocolate chip pancakes without taking a breath.

In this revision, the writer has added adjectives (underlined) to better describe the customer and what he or she ate. Notice the writer also included an adverbial phrase (underlined twice) at the end of the sentence to modify the verb “ate.”

✓ Adverbs

Adverbs are descriptive words that describe, qualify, or modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs. Many adverbs are formed by adding the “-ly” suffix to an adjective (colorful {adj} - colorfully {adv}).

+ Use adverbs carefully. While these descriptive words can help you demonstrate the “degree” of another word, some writers have been known to use them repetitively.

Example: The very tall pitcher was able to throw the ball very quickly.

In this example, the term “very” is used twice to express the degree of “tallness” and “quickness.”

Revision: The unusually tall pitcher was able to throw the ball with exceptional speed.

In this revision, a better adverb (“unusually”) was used to describe the pitcher’s “tallness,” while the adjective “exceptional” was substituted to modify the “speed” of the pitch.

Both adjectives and adverbs may take the positive, comparative, or superlative degree. These degrees distinguish the relationships between the things being modified.

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Comparative</th>
<th>Superlative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adjective</td>
<td>sharp</td>
<td>sharper</td>
<td>sharpest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adverb</td>
<td>carefully</td>
<td>more carefully</td>
<td>most carefully</td>
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Example: The symptoms are more serious for men.

The comparative form of the adjective “serious” describes the severity of the symptoms for men while making an implied comparison to the severity of the symptoms for women.
Example: I was treated most respectfully by the host.

The superlative form of the adverb “respectfully” describes the level of respect that the speaker received.

✓ Optional Exercise

Rewrite the following sentences to make the verbs more vivid or use active voice when appropriate.

1. The scientist offered a solution that became the cure for the patient’s medical mystery.

   ________________________________________________________________

   ________________________________________________________________

2. Taylor made a demand that the work would be finished by us.

   ________________________________________________________________

   ________________________________________________________________

Fill in an appropriate adverb or adjective that will make the sentence more descriptive. Then explain your choice.

3. My ___________ course load keeps me ________ busy, so I will be unable to play intramural sports this semester.

   ________________________________________________________________

   ________________________________________________________________

4. My favorite way to motivate myself is to roam through the _____________ store and dream of all the things I will one day be able to afford after I find a ___________ job.

   ________________________________________________________________

   ________________________________________________________________
Possible Responses

1. In this sentence, the weak verb “offered” can be improved. More vigorous verb choices include either of the following:

   The scientist solved the medical mystery.
   The scientist cured the patient’s mysterious ailment.

2. There are two corrections to make to this sentence. The first involves the phrase “made a demand.” The word “demand” is more effective if used as a verb instead of as a noun. The second correction involves the passive construction of “the work would be finished by us.” In this case, the subject receives the action instead of actively completing it.

   Taylor demanded that we finish the work.

3. An adjective, “heavy,” describes the course load, while an adverb, “extremely,” modifies the adjective “busy.”

   My heavy course load keeps me extremely busy, so I will be unable to play intramural sports this semester.

4. The adjective “home improvement” describes the type of store and the adjective “well paying” describes the type of job.

   My favorite way to motivate myself is to roam through the home improvement store and dream of all the things I will one day be able to afford after I find a well-paying job.