

Forms of <i>To be</i>				
	Present	Past	Perfect	Progressive
I	<i>am</i>	<i>was</i>	<i>have been/had been</i>	<i>am / was being</i>
he/she/it	<i>is</i>	<i>was</i>	<i>has been/had been</i>	<i>is / was being</i>
you/we/they	<i>are</i>	<i>were</i>	<i>have been/had been</i>	<i>are / were being</i>

I am. You are. She is. Obviously, being is essential to existence, so it's no surprise that *to be* verbs are essential in writing. (In fact, the previous sentence used three *to be* verbs. Can you spot them?) We're the first to admit that it is nearly impossible to write without using an occasional *are* or *is*. (In fact, we just used two more!) However, most of us rely too heavily on *to be* verbs or use them unconsciously. *To be* verbs lack the vigor and power offered by stronger, more-action packed verbs. As a result, our writing suffers.

Try the techniques below to invigorate your prose.

1. Replace the *to be* verb with a stronger, more specific verb:

Weak & Wordy	Strong & Specific
My sister is loud when she is telling her children to do their homework.	My sister bellows when telling her children to do their homework.

Sometimes, this requires changing the word order in a sentence:

Weak & Wordy	Strong & Specific
The restaurant's food is excellent.	The restaurant serves excellent food.

2. Change one or more of the nouns in the sentence into a verb:

Weak & Wordy	Strong & Specific
Jennifer Lawrence is the <u>star</u> of <i>The Hunger Games</i> .	Jennifer Lawrence stars in <i>The Hunger Games</i> .
Our mother was the <u>driver</u> of the bus.	Our mother drove the bus.

3. Combine short, choppy sentences to eliminate *to be* verbs:

Weak & Wordy	Strong & Specific
The food at the restaurant is excellent. The hamburgers are juicy. The onion rings are crispy. The pie is the best I have ever eaten.	The restaurant serves excellent food, including juicy hamburgers, crispy onion rings, and the best pie I have ever eaten.

4. Avoid overusing *there is, there are, there were, this is, etc.*

Weak & Wordy	Strong & Specific
The restaurant's parking lot is narrow. There are not very many parking spaces and those that are available are too cramped.	The restaurant suffers from a narrow parking lot with only a few cramped spaces.

In the strong example above, we not only combined sentences to eliminate *to be* verbs, but we also eliminated *there are* and *that are*. Such expressions delay or minimize the subject and add needless words. In the revisions below, we rearranged the sentences to emphasize the subjects, chose stronger verbs, and cut needless words.

Weak & Wordy	Strong & Specific
It is my intention to transfer to a four-year university.	I intend to transfer to a four-year university.
There were some important findings resulting from this experiment.	This experiment resulted in some important findings.

Sometimes, you can cut unnecessary words with no other changes:

Weak & Wordy	Strong & Specific
He struggled with the paper that was assigned by the professor.	He struggled with the paper assigned by the professor.

5. Replace a *to be* verb + a prepositional phrase with a strong verb:

Weak & Wordy	Strong & Specific
Electric car technology was in existence as early as 1830.	Electric car technology existed as early as 1830.
Negative advertising is influential on voters' perceptions of candidates.	Negative advertising influences voters' perceptions of candidates.
I am in receipt of your letter.	I have received your letter/ I received your letter.

6. Replace a *to be* verb + an *-ing* word with a simple verb:

Weak & Wordy	Strong & Specific
The stock market was fluctuating wildly before the crash.	The stock market fluctuated wildly before the crash.
The concept of immortality is intriguing to me.	The concept of immortality intrigues me.