

Using Strong Verbs and Nouns

Choosing the best word can make your writing clearer, stronger, more effective, and more interesting. A more specific word can convey more information. Often adjectives and adverbs are a clumsy [replacement](#) for a well-chosen noun or verb. Some words are so bland and vague that they tell the reader almost nothing. Such words should almost always be replaced.

Being Specific

A specific word tells us more than a generic word. A dog could be a collie, a terrier, or a mutt. If a woman walks, does she stroll, wander, or march? The image that we get when we read about a grandmother marching along with her collie is so much more vivid than when we read about a woman walking along with her dog.

Creating Impact

The right words can make your writing vivid and [memorable](#). Consider the following examples:

- **Bland** - The house was on fire.
- **Vivid** - Flames erupted from the windows.
- **Bland** - Goliath was taller than David.
- **Vivid** - The giant towered over David.

The vivid examples are more effective because they are specific, they are dramatic, and they create an image in the reader's mind.

Removing Adjectives and Adverbs

If you can replace an adverb and a verb with a better verb by itself, you probably should. It will usually improve your writing. "The man ran quickly" should be "the man sprinted" or "the man dashed." "She said loudly" might be "she shouted" or "she called."

Take the same approach with adjectives, replacing them when you can. A terrible, oppressive leader is a tyrant. A strong, fit person is an athlete. A mean, intimidating person is a bully.

Vague Words

Watch out for words that say almost nothing. Consider the verb "to go." Almost any other verb will tell the reader more about what happened. "I went to the store" is vague. "I drove to the store" or "I walked to the store" is better. "Vehicle" could refer to a car, truck, or bus.

If you must use adjectives or adverbs, use good ones. Words like "good" and "bad," "wonderful" and "terrible," are so vague that they are almost meaningless. Dig deeper and find a better description.

In *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Mark Twain cautions us on using adjectives: "As to the adjective, when in doubt, strike it out."

Clifton Fadiman warns us too: "The adjective is the banana peel of the parts of speech."

Adjectives modify nouns. In the examples below, we see a tired boy sitting down:

The tired boy sat down.

The exhausted boy sat down.

The weary boy [sat](#) down.

The worn-out boy sat down.

The sleepy boy sat down.

The nodding boy sat down.

The drowsy boy sat down.

More than one adjective can modify a single noun as in the examples below:

The tired little boy sat down.

The exhausted young boy sat down.

The small weary boy sat down.

Adding more adjectives weakens writing. Strong writing comes from strong verbs and nouns. You may be asking what strong verbs and nouns are. Strong verbs and nouns have several qualities:

1. They are precise.
2. Rather than being commonly used, they are less commonly used.
3. They are paintbrushes creating visual and visceral images.

We can edit these sentences to tell us the boy is tired without using any adjectives:

The boy gasped for air after running down the mountain and fell into the chair in front of me. The boy finished swimming across the river, emerged from the water, staggered to a chair, and collapsed.

We can further edit these sentences, without using any adjectives, to include that the boy is small.

After running down the mountain, the boy gasped for air and fell into the chair in front of me, his feet still 12 inches from touching the floor.

The boy finished swimming across the river, emerged from the water, stood up towering at least two feet taller than my poodle, staggered to a chair, and collapsed.

These two examples, written with verbs and nouns, reveal more than adjectives. Adjectives only tell. Nouns and verbs show. The adjective still has a place in [writing](#). We would like to suggest the following list of rules:

1. Whenever possible, use verbs and nouns to show instead of using adjectives to tell.
2. If you must use adjectives to describe a noun, limit yourself to one.
3. When you use an adjective, avoid overused adjectives such as nice, good, bad, important, interesting, and beautiful.
4. When you use an adjective, try to use uncommon adjectives such as decorous, gratifying, iniquitous, burning, and ravishing.

5. Use a metaphor or [simile](#) instead of an adjective.

Metaphors show how differences can be similar. Here are two examples:

1. The boy liked swimming very much.
2. The boy was a fish, only leaving the water to sleep.

The first example is a common sentence. The second example uses a metaphor to convey the same information with stronger writing.

A simile also compares two different things, often using the words like or as. We can use a simile to communicate the same information as follows:

The boy was like a fish, only jumping out of the water for a second or two at a time.

In moderation, adjectives help our writing. Most writers, however, overuse adjectives. Mark Twain thus cautions us. Our suggestion is the next time you reach for an adjective, remember the alternatives of strong nouns and verbs, and similes and metaphors. If one of these options is better for your writing, use it.

Compare these two passages:

1) "There was quaking, the sea tossed and turned, and there was lots of lightening and fire, not to mention the ash that fell from the sky. It was unforgettable!"

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2) "We saw the sea sucked away by the heaving of the earth. . . a fearful cloud forked with great tongues of fire lashed at the heavens and torrents of ash began to pour from the sky."

The examples give proof enough that nouns and verbs carefully chosen show. Nothing intensifies the impact for the reader like specific nouns and verbs that give action to those nouns. Strong nouns and verbs served Pliny the Younger well when he wrote about the volcano that destroyed Pompeii in 79 A.D (second paragraph). They are your most effective verbal tools, too.

Let's zero in on verbs first. What are some of the verbs that Pliny used to put us in the action? Compare those with the verbs used in the first paragraph. Note how the weak verbs in the first example fail to create the mental picture that the verbs of Pliny's choice do.

The weakest verbs of all in the English language are the forms of "to be"-- is, are, was, were, am, there is, there are... Those are linking verbs as opposed to action verbs. "To be" verbs should be replaced with more dynamic action, which sometimes means the entire sentence must be restructured. Here are two examples:

There are fifteen robberies daily.

Fifteen robberies occur daily.

Polly Anderson is the new Miss Teen USA.

Crowned yesterday, Polly Anderson began her reign as the new Miss Teen USA.

Nouns can also be general or precise. A dog can be a puppy, a cur, a wolf or a Chihuahua. Note the different mental pictures you associate with the specific nouns as opposed to the generic "dog." Using specific nouns helps you pin down details for your reader.

Sometimes you have to eliminate nouns if they are unnecessary.

"Boats were docked due to rough surf conditions" is better stated as: Boats were docked due to rough surf.

"Computer error problems caused delay" becomes: Computer error caused delay

Of course you aren't going to write an entire article using two word sentences. Adjectives and adverbs can help, but they work best when they support the carefully chosen nouns and verbs. Such descriptive words spell death to prose when they stand alone and/or attached to the "to be" verbs, because they draw no mental pictures for the reader. For example:

The work is marvelous.

The girl is incredibly talented.

There is no mental image of what the work is or why it's marvelous. "Sweeping masses of bold color made the picture come alive," gives the reader something to imagine as he or she reads. The reader would want to know what the girl is doing that makes the writer feel she is incredibly talented. They want the writer to show them, not tell them.

Adjectives (describes a noun, pronoun or other adjective) should add content. In Pliny's account, the "great tongues of fire" would not be the same without the adjective. But words like "fabulous," "exciting," "special," and "lovely" have about as much meaning as "new and improved." <g>

Adverbs (modifies a verb, adjective or other adverb and often ends in "-ly") tend to weaken prose, by propping up words that are not strong. The most common "useless" adverbs are: really, very, extremely. You can see how easily these can be eliminated:

really happy = joyful

very slow = sluggish

extremely talented = gifted

Even adverbs with substance should give you pause, just to make sure that there isn't a more specific verb that could do the job alone.

Adverbs and adjectives carelessly used just tell. Be aware of them and make sure they are doing a job, rather than puffing up your sentences with little more than air. Which descriptive words are working? Ask yourself if your article means the same without the word. If it does, then the word is not "working" and can be left out. However, if you leave it out and the meaning changes significantly or the picture is no longer what you intend for it to be, then the description is necessary and needs to remain. And always strive to find a noun or verb that will do the same job as all your descriptive words put together. Therein lies the strength of specific nouns and verbs.

A few final things to consider to strengthen your writing:

Avoid cliches and other common phrases that a reader sees or hears so often that they can finish your sentence before they read it.

Choose description wisely and use variety:

Comparisons that are accurate, clear and common to the experience of your reader can help you paint good mental pictures

Use metaphors--the implied comparisons between two objects or ideas that are different: a heart of stone. (But get more creative than that! <G>)

Similes directly compare two unlike things or actions. "Miss Trefusis was all bones and grey skin, and when she walked her body was bent forward in a long curve like a boomerang." (Roald Dahl, Going Solo)

Analogies can help you.

All the senses, not just sight, can be employed as well when you are endeavoring to paint word pictures for an audience.

Take a keen interest in words. They are the colors with which you paint. Keep a dictionary handy and use it when you encounter a word or phrase that is unfamiliar, or when you are tempted to use a word

when the meaning is hazy in your mind. A thesaurus is also a useful tool, when used as a memory jogger. It is important to keep in mind that your goal is to find a word that nails down the meaning for the reader, not one that merely attracts attention to your writing. Don't corrupt your style and voice by inserting exotic synonyms that you will use once and never again.

Also, continue to be observant. When you read an article that strikes you as particularly well done, note how the words the author chose to use contribute to the overall effect.

Sources:

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