

In principle, you do NOT need to eliminate each “to be” verb from your essays. There are instances (like in this sentence) when “to be” clearly and directly communicates the idea. Sometimes *is* is the best way to put it. But, if you were to go to an essay that you’ve written in the past year, I think you would be shocked by just how many “to be” verbs you have included. So, let’s work through some strategies to eradicate as many “to be” verbs as possible.

Strategies:

1. Replace *to be* verbs with bolder, more specific verbs.

Vague & Wordy

My sister **is** loud when she **is** telling her children to do their homework.

Bold & Specific

My sister **bellows** when telling her children to do their homework.

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

Vague & Wordy

The restaurant’s food **is** excellent.

Bold & Specific

The restaurant **serves** excellent food.

2. Change one or more of the nouns in the sentence into a verb. I call this “verbing a noun”.

Vague & Wordy

Jennifer Lawrence **is** the star of *The Hunger Games*.

Our mother **was** the driver of the bus.

Bold & Specific

Jennifer Lawrence **stars** in *The Hunger Games*.

Our mother **drove** the bus.

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

Vague & Wordy

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.

Bold & Specific

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.*

Vague & Wordy

The restaurant’s parking lot **is** narrow. **There are** not very many parking spaces and those **that are** available **are** too cramped.

Bold & Specific

The restaurant **suffers** from a narrow parking lot with only a few cramped spaces.

Vague & Wordy

It is my intention to transfer to a four-year university.

There were some important findings resulting from this experiment.

Bold & Specific

I **intend** to transfer to a four-year university.

This experiment **resulted** in some important findings.

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

Vague & Wordy

He struggled with the paper **that was assigned** by the professor.

Bold & Specific

He struggled with the paper **assigned** by the professor.

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

Vague & Wordy

Electric car technology **was in existence** as early as 1830.

Negative advertising **is influential** on voters' perceptions of candidates.

I **am in receipt** of your letter.

Bold & Specific

Electric car technology **existed** as early as 1830.

Negative advertising **influences** voters' perceptions of candidates.

I **have received** your letter/ I **received** your letter.

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

Vague & Wordy

The stock market **was fluctuating** wildly before the crash.

The concept of immortality **is intriguing** to me.

Bold & Specific

The stock market **fluctuated** wildly before the crash.

The concept of immortality **intrigues** me.

Rewrite the following sentences, eliminating all "to be" verbs:

1. Vitamins are substances the body requires in small amounts.

2. There are several advantages that will be achieved by this ruling.

3. Women are faced with similar anxieties every day.

4. A solution to the problem of UFO's will never be found by the Air Force.

5. Up to fifteen feet of chalk an hour were devoured by the drill.

6. There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground.

7. The reason he left college was that his health became impaired.

8. The sea imagery can first be seen when Mrs. Pontellier is on Grande Isle. On Grande Isle the wind is "charged with the seductive odor of the sea" (Chopin 12). This seductive odor of the sea causes Edna to reflect on her life.

9. Thomas Edison was the original inventor of the electric light bulb.

10. Stealing the family heirlooms was the accusation made against Senor Ortega by Senora Sanchez.

Further practice:

Take out your most recent essay. Count the number of "to be" verbs in your essay. Write that number: _____
Shocked? Rewrite the two most convoluted sentences with overused "to be" verbs from that essay here:

Original: _____

Revision: _____

Original: _____

Revision: _____
