

COLLEGE WRITING GUIDE

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The Concrete Noun For Readability

“When you think of a concrete object, you think wordlessly, and then, if you want to describe the thing you have been visualizing you probably hunt about until you find the exact words that seem to fit. When you think of something abstract, you are more inclined to use words from the start, and unless you make a conscious effort to prevent it, the existing dialect will come rushing in and do the job for you, at the expense of blurring or even changing your meaning.”

—George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language*

The clearest writers make a conscious effort, as George Orwell suggests above, to write in terms of things. Even when they write about ideas, clear writers pay attention to objects. If your “writer-imagina-

tion” is not focused on thinking of real objects, then you must train it.

Touch is the most powerful sense of all because it’s the most primitive sense, the earliest sense. You’ve seen how the human baby, even before he can focus his eyes, has instincts and reflexes that turn his cheek toward his mother’s breast. The world is something we feel with our skin.

Because of all this, as writers, we worry about “concrete nouns.” What’s a concrete noun? A word that names something you can drop on your foot. Look at these words: cinder block, baseball bat, cherry pie, comb, BMW, American flag, white picket fence, black dog. Each of these is a concrete noun or a phrase based on a concrete noun. By definition then, a concrete noun names a touchable object.

Exercise: Do the drop-on-foot-test and circle the concrete nouns.

respect

constitution

watch

sadness

elbow

obfuscation

et cetera

step

heel

trashcan

sweetness

charity

shoelace

ignorance

hinge

exfoliation

gratitude

music

stethoscope

porch

consternation

nutrition

pungency

show

doorbell

knowledge

leakage

eyebrow

morality

good

degree

protection

degradation

vitamin

garlic

oil can

Objects lend vividness to writing. Even a tiny object will register on the reader and be seen.

Exercises with concrete nouns

1. Study Reading 6, “A Good Time to be an American in Egypt?” Carefully circle all the objects, giving them the “drop on your foot” test. What are the ideas? Write a three-paragraph piece that explains why these objects connect well to the abstract idea of the piece.

2. Study Reading 7, “A Two-Year Detour” for concrete objects. List the objects. Write a short paragraph about your favorite physical detail in that essay. Why did it “work” for you? What was the most surprising detail for you?

3. Write a 300-word mini-essay on your favorite character from literature or the movies and his/her relationship with the physical environment. (For example: Huckleberry Finn and the raft on the Mississippi.)

Replacing Abstractions with Concrete Nouns

Even though concrete nouns go into the reader's mind faster than abstract ideas, you have to write about ideas, especially in college. Your professors will present you with all kinds of abstractions to write about: historical influences,

literary models and theories from competing schools of thought.

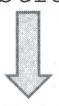
The way to readability success lies in moving back down the ladder to the physical reality from which the abstractions came.

There's a simple diagram that captures the relationship of things and ideas: the famous "ladder of abstraction," displayed here. (Four different "ladders" are shown.)

The abstract ideas like "science" sit on the top rung. But as you go down the ladder you get to physical objects,

things you can drop on your foot, and also people.

Good writers downplay the abstractions and consciously pay attention to **the bottom rung**—writing about people and things. People and things are interesting.

Physical activity Sports Golf Pro golf Tiger Woods	Abstract  Concrete	Territoriality Territory Dirt This backyard Growling pitbull	Science Nutrition Food Vegetation Broccoli	Vagueness Foggy night Something glimpsed Dracula!
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EXERCISE: Right below is a grid of abstract words taken from an issue of a news magazine. (If you want to double check, go through the list, and see if you can drop these things on your foot.) You are going to pick ten words from this list, and for each one name *two* concrete nouns that relate to it. This can be a group project.

Examples: exercise (abstract) → running shoes, treadmill (droppable)
 information (abstract) → encyclopedia, pamphlet (droppable)
 the sport of golf (abstract) → putter, golf cart (droppable)

(We are not looking for synonyms. Neither running shoes nor treadmills are synonymous with exercise. But they are related to exercise, and that's what counts here.)

resolution	prescription drugs	reputation	international travel	thrill
environment	problem	escapism	scientific research	volunteerism
power	literature	menace	maternity	tax cut
religion	hatred	restraint	wealthy special interests	gambling
love	nutrition	audience	viciousness	carbohydrate
exercise	immigration	interstate commerce	history	freedom

Exercise: Read E.B. White's essay "Freedom" (Reading 9) and circle the concrete nouns. Then list them on a sheet of paper. What seems to you the strangest object for an essay on freedom? Make careful note how the most unlikely concrete objects (windowsill, for example) keep the reader's mind engaged in the abstract idea of freedom.

Exercise: Find all the concrete nouns in a NEWSWEEK article, either one from this week's issue, or from the My Turn piece called "Leave Your Hat on, But Lose the Jeans" (Reading 8).

Take-Home Work: Bring in a list of 10 abstract words from articles you've read at home. Swap papers with another student and come up with two concrete nouns for each abstraction. Write a parody paragraph in which all 20 nouns are used.

Writing Exercise: Write a paragraph of 150 words on one of the abstract words in the grid above or on an abstraction your teacher approves. Here's the hitch: you must be concrete; ten of the 150 words must be concrete nouns.

Writing Exercise: Pick an abstract word that summarizes either your favorite or your least favorite person or character from the news or from literature or movies. (Kindness? Meanness? Curiosity? Evasiveness?) Now, write a 300- to 600-word profile of that person concentrating on the objects the person owns, uses or is surrounded by. Standard: one word in 20 must be a concrete noun.

Questions for further thought: Which is the more concrete word, coins or money? Why? How about the words "music" or "sheet music"?

The Active Verb for Readability

Some parts of a sentence make it go and the other parts merely come along for the ride. Imagine you are driving to class one rainy morning and the car dies. You pull over to the side of the road. As the other traffic rolls past, you get out, open the hood and take a look at the engine. You know it's the engine that's the trouble. Everyone knows that. You do not check the rear window glass, or adjust the driver's seat, or inspect the radio antenna. You open the hood and look at the engine. That's usually where the problem is.

With writing, the engine of every sentence is its verb. When a sentence dies on you or sputters badly, the problem is often the verb.

You have to repair the verb. For beginning writers this can be easier said than done.

To repair verbs, you need to find them, decide if they are good or bad and then execute a fix.

The next pages contain exercises that will help you:

- Classify them as good—strong and colorful—or in need of improvement.
- Fix the ones that can be improved.

Note the strong verb use in these sentences from *NEWSWEEK*:

- The administration initially ignored its requests for some key documents, snubbed efforts to get Bush and others to testify and shrugged off threats of subpoenas. ("Who Was Really in Charge," by Daniel Klaidman and Michael Hirsh, June 28, 2004)
- By mousing around and clicking, you swoop down like Superman, down, down, down, to a location on terra firma. ("Making the Ultimate Mouse Trap," by Steven Levy, June 7, 2004)
- Most brazenly, four gunmen entered a residential compound for oil-industry workers in Khobar last month and killed 22 people. ("The Saudi Trap," by Fareed Zakaria, June 28, 2004)

DULL VERB FORMS

"Is," "was" and all forms of the verb "to be."

EXAMPLES

Sergeant York was a short man.
Flu will be widespread this season.
It is my belief that affirmative action matters.

"Has," "had" and all forms of the verb "have."

The student had lots of trouble with physics.
I had a beef with him.
The civil war had many causes.
Automatic transmissions have many problems.

Passive verbs—these are formed on the verb "to be."

Sam was hit by Joe.
The high-tech industry was hit by a recession.
The groceries were carried out to the car.

Progressive verbs—these use "is" or "was" plus "-ing".

They were progressing toward their degrees nicely.
During that month, he was driving me crazy.
The mass media have been giving presidents too much power.

None of these verb forms is forbidden. It's a matter of proportions.

But good writers really work to cut out all the "is," "was," "has" and "had" stuff they possibly can.

Read this example:

FIRST VERSION: What good writers do, however, is to keep these duller, low-energy verbs to a minimum.

PROBLEM VERB: is

REVISION: Good writers, however, keep these duller, low-energy verbs to a minimum.

SOLUTION: Drop the "is," and promote from within. Promote the infinitive "to keep" to the active verb "keep."

EXERCISE: Each of the following sentences relies on forms of “to be” either standing alone or in combination with a helper. Underline the “be” verbs and rewrite the sentences so the “be’s” vanish and the verbs become active.

1. The dice he cast were loaded.
2. The rain will be back tomorrow.
3. He was clearly a nice man, a man who, naturally enough, wanted to do something nice for her.
4. It has been a car that just won’t run in the rain.
5. She is grumpy again.
6. The cake will be the best Monsieur Pearl can make.
7. The shovel was exactly where he’d expected it to be.
8. Had there been a noise, the alarm would have gone off.
9. There had been no fish for dinner last night, despite an afternoon of fishing.
10. Grandma will be going to the supermarket on Tuesday.
11. He was hoping she had changed her mind.
12. There would have been more pizza for us but I forgot about Jill’s hungry boyfriend.
13. Has there been an election more tense than this one?
14. She will be at home tomorrow.
15. The reporters were grousing at the stale bagels and bad coffee available at the press conference.
16. Jim Brannigan was in kitchen doorway of his house, staring out the back door at a small wisp of smoke on the western horizon.

EXERCISE: Investigating the relationship of objects and active verbs to readability.

- A) Read this 140-word student passage below. How readable and clear is it? On a 1-10 scale, where a 10 is totally clear, give it a score for readability.
- B. Underline the main verbs. List them. Circle the concrete objects and list them.
- C) How many sentences were there? How many active verbs? (Some sentences have more than one.) What is the ratio, as a percentage, of active verbs to sentences? Write a sentence or two on the connection between readability and a high active-verb percentage.
- D. Write a similar paragraph of 150 words about where you grew up. Make it match the model in number of concrete nouns and percentage of active verbs.

I grew up in a small down in Pennsylvania. I lived on a farm, alongside beautiful green grass and lush yellow cornfields. I performed farm chores with my father. I fed the cattle and raked hay. The town was called Waynesboro and the population never exceeded 10,000. Almost all the citizens knew each other and if they didn’t, they waved “hello” anyway. We went to church every Sunday and based our beliefs and actions on what we learned there. What our town lacked in population, it made up for in love. Helping others took priority over helping oneself. In my family, I was taught that this was the right way to live. My parents stressed the importance of serving others, without caring about the rewards. I always felt appreciated and loved. I could never imagine anyone not caring about me.

Making the 'to-be' Verb Active

Writing with “be” verbs is like eating cookies: one cookie is no problem, but 10 in a row is a different matter. Same with “be” verbs. One is no problem, but 10 in a row weakens your style and bores your reader.

In our first attempts to write, we often lean on forms of the verb “to be.” Good writers then edit them out.

EXERCISE:

Each of the following sentences relies on a “be” verb. Change them so the verb “be” disappears and an active verb replaces it. (First underline the “be” verb, then make your changes.)

Examples:

Anchee Min is the writer of a new novel about Madame Mao, who helped her in her youth.

Answer: Anchee Min has written a new novel ...

The doctor who treats the HIV patients was a graduate of the University of Colorado Medical School.

Answer: The doctor who treats the HIV patients graduated ...

1. The way Chairman Mao talked in the cave of the Mekong was passionate and seductive.
2. Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera was set amidst the romantic canals of Venice.
3. All the people whom she hated are now in jail.
4. A week or so later Minor was moved from under the red flag of the advance field hospital and sent to the city of Alexandria.
5. I am a student of China and I am going to China this Saturday.
6. The emotion behind what you are saying is overwhelming to me.
7. The small horrors of his illness were growing.
8. It is emotional expressiveness for American.
9. I was jumping around being a cheerleader worrying about what I was going to wear.
10. It was at St. Elizabeth's Hospital that his hitherto puzzling illness was given what might be regarded as its first modern, currently recognizable description.
11. The man behind the counter is hostile to everyone he faces.
12. The surrounding countryside was green and golden to his eye, and the cows all around were happy.
13. The street where I live will be flooded when the rains come.
14. It is an inside history of the cultural revolution.
15. The City of Lowell was Jack Kerouac's home until he left and began roaming around the country.
16. It was hard for the Communist Chinese to suppress love.