

SEEING THE VERBS AS A SPINE

Once you get “readability eyes,” you can put on x-ray glasses, squint, and see a paragraph as a sequence of verbs. Yes, there are other words in a paragraph, but the verbs are the spine. Readers can sense the spine of verbs in a paragraph—and also the lack of a spine when that’s the case.

Here are two nearly identical paragraphs, Version A and Version B. Can you see the differences? Which paragraph is better? (Macabre cartoon follows.)

VERSION A

Recently I went with my girl friend to a concert of tango music in Andover. It was in a large auditorium on the campus of Merrimack College, a modern place with comfortable seats and beautiful wooden panels floating above the stage to reflect the sound outward. There was quite a crowd of older people, as we were let in through the tall glass doors. There were many gray heads in sight. That’s probably because the tickets for this event were thirty dollars and only the retirees of Andover were well off enough to afford them.

VERSION B

Recently I went with my girl friend to a concert of tango music in Andover. The concert took place in a large auditorium on the campus of Merrimack College, a modern place with comfortable seats and beautiful wooden panels floating above the stage to reflect the sound outward. Quite a crowd of older people milled about in the foyer, as we walked past them through the tall glass doors. We saw many gray heads, in other words. The tickets cost thirty dollars, and that probably explains why well-off retirees occupied most of the auditorium seats.

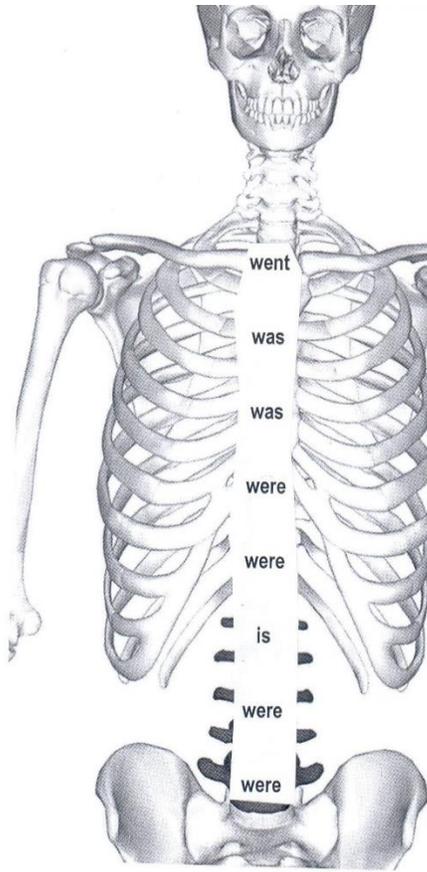
Did you figure it out yet? Let’s highlight the verbs in A and B. What do you notice now? Which paragraph has the stronger verb spine?

VERSION A

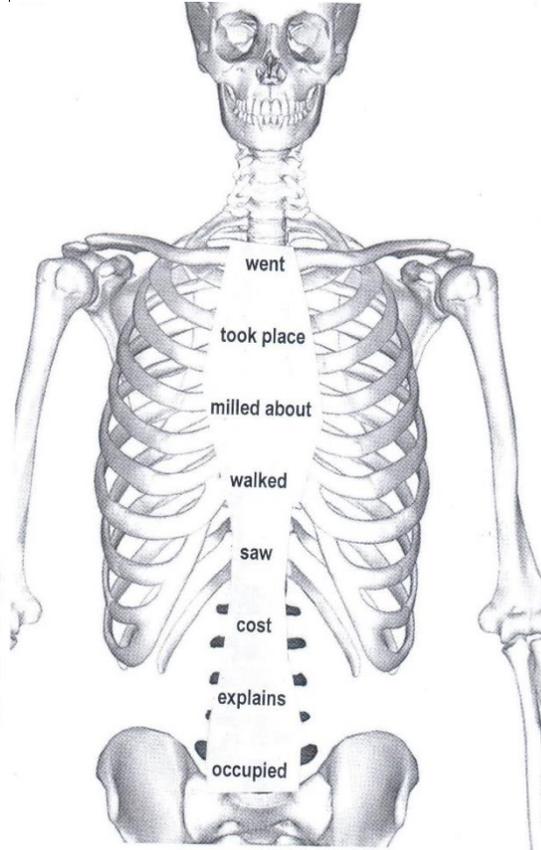
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VERSION B

Recently I **went** with my girl friend to a concert of tango music in Andover. The concert **took place** in a large auditorium on the campus of Merrimack College, a modern place with comfortable seats and beautiful wooden panels floating above the stage to reflect the sound outward. Quite a crowd of older people **milled about** in the foyer, as we **walked** past them through the tall glass doors. We **saw** many gray heads, in other words. The tickets **cost** thirty dollars, and that probably **explains** why well-off retirees **occupied** most of the auditorium seats.



Why VERSION A feels weak: no spine.



Why VERSION B feels stronger: strong spine.

EX. 12-4. FIND THE VERB SPINE. Here's a passage from the reading at the end of the lesson. Imitate the "spinal cord analysis" we just did, and list the verb spine. Include only the main verbs—not verbal adjectives, not verbs from subordinate clauses. This is eight sentences and nine verbs.

The first event took place early in October. It was a mild, rainy Missouri morning. I had been up all night recording on my four track in my parents basement. Around 9:00 am my mother slowly crept down the steps. I could see from the look on her face that something was wrong. "I just received a phone call." she explained. "Last night Smitty flipped his truck and was killed instantly." An immediate pain filled my stomach.

