Not To Be? Like, Ever?

Strong verbs communicate clearly and propel dynamic prose. On the other hand, writers who overuse forms of the verb *to be* rob their writing of action, precision, originality, and interest. But can you—should you—eschew all forms of the verb *to be* altogether? Proponents of E-Prime suggest that you should.

Don't let the "E-" fool you; E-Prime, short for English Prime, has nothing to do with the Internet or electronic communication. In fact, it derives from a system of linguistic philosophy first articulated by Alfred Korzybski in the 1920s. Called "general semantics," this philosophy reacted against Aristotelian essentialism and the notion that language can capture the essence of a concept, object, or being in some finite way. The theory rejects the notion that anything "is" or "is not" anything. "The map is not the territory," Korzybski wrote, and to hold otherwise denies the complexities and nuances of reality. Most important to the philosophy of general semantics, this abstraction and essentialization leads to much human miscommunication, conflict, and unhappiness. Simply put, general semantics seeks peace and sanity through precise, mindful communication.

To further these goals, Korzybski's student, D. David Bourland, Jr., published an essay in 1965 in which he proposed eradicating all forms of *to be* from the English language. Calling this new form of English *E-Prime*, Bourland sought to correct two ills that the verb *to be* perpetuates: "the is of identity," which identifies individuals as members of a class (e.g. "Humans are mammals") and "the is of predication," which miscommunicates perceptions as realities (e.g., "The ball is red" vs. "I perceive the ball as red").

Although we see the enduring influence of general semantics in some types of psychotherapy, in general studies of human communication, and in science fiction, over the years, the philosophy and its principles have fallen from favor. Many characterize it as pseudoscience. Linguists and authors criticize E-Prime as reducing readability and transparency. Even those who subscribe to the tenets of general semantics concede that strict adherence to E-Prime principles hampers reader fluency.

All that said, efforts to minimize the use of the verb *to be* can impose a discipline and mindfulness that lead to more effective writing.

Minimize Unhelpful Passive Voice

Passive voice either moves a sentence's true subject from the subject role to the object role or omits the actor from the sentence altogether. *I heard it through the grapevine* becomes *It was heard through the grapevine by me* or just *It was heard through the grapevine*. Not only does it disrupt the meter of the song, passive voice hides the actor, obscures the action, and blunts precision. It also often inserts unnecessary prepositional phrases, which add bulk and can lead to twisted syntax.

Passive voice may travel with a form of the verb *to be. A new system of earning revenue is needed. The run was led by Gabby.* So avoiding *to be* helps eliminate some passive voice. That said, you do not use passive voice every time you employ a form of the verb *to be*; as E-Prime itself notes, sometimes we use *to be* to describe a state of being.

Some teachers impose absolute bans on passive voice, but passive voice has its place. You will encounter occasions where it makes sense to shift focus from the actor to the action. For example, *my client stabbed the victim* becomes *the victim was stabbed.* Or you may not know the identity of the actor: *The car was stolen* puts the focus on the pilfered vehicle, whereas *someone stole the car* shifts that focus to the unknown actor. Finally, you may wish to emphasize the object: *156 individuals have been exonerated from death row since 1973.*

Choose More Precise, Dynamic Verbs

My first drafts include more *to be* verbs than do my final drafts. As I revise, I tighten each sentence, seeking opportunities to select a more potent verb. Use your search function to ferret out many unhelpful uses of "to be":

- Search for sentences that begin with *there is* or *there were. There is only one Arizona court that has applied the family purpose doctrine absent a parent-child relationship.* Better: *Only one Arizona court has applied the family purpose doctrine absent a parent-child relationship.*
- Search for versions of *to be* and scrutinize each result. *There is this tiny French bulldog, Gabby, who is a better runner than I am.* Better: *Despite having three-inch-long legs, Gabby the French bulldog easily outpaces me on every run.*

Like passive voice, *to be* has its place. But minimize your use of *to be* verbs and your writing becomes more dynamic, more concise, and more precise. Eliminate forms of the verb "to be" from your vocabulary and become a better, happier person? The jury's still out on that one. **AZ AT**

> **Efforts to minimize the use of the verb *to be* can impose a discipline and lead to more effective writing.**

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