

# Active Voice and “Be” Verbs



## What are “be” verbs? How do writers use them?

“Be” verbs describe states of existence objectively, in terms of both *when* and *what*.

There are three main ways we use “be” verbs:

- As Helping verbs to help us understand when actions happen.  
She **is** running (now); She **was** running (before).
- As Linking verbs to link/connect the subject to additional information.  
I **am** tired (I=tired); They **are** sports fans (they=sports fans)
- To construct the passive voice, which is when a sentence’s subject changes from the agent (the do-er of the action) to the object (the thing being acted upon).  
*passive*: The ball **was** thrown by him; *active*: He threw the ball.

## What are some examples of “be” verbs?

- Present tense: am, are, is; (I **am**, you/they **are**, he/she/it **is**)
- Past tense: was, were; (I **was**, you/they **were**, he/she/it **was**)
- Past participle: been; (I have **been**; he/she/it has **been**, they have **been**)
- Present participle: being; (I am **being**)

## Writers are sometimes told by readers to use more “active voice.” What is “active voice”?

Sometimes “be” verbs are necessary in writing. However, it is easy to overuse them. Overuse can result in “weak” and “ambiguous” writing. Replacing “be” verbs with active verbs has many benefits:

- Writing is stronger/clearer.
- Writing is more descriptive.
- Vocabulary is expanded.
- Writing is less repetitive/more succinct.

## Active Voice and "Be" Verbs

For example, check out the following sentences to see how eliminating "be" verbs can strengthen a sentence:

- Biology **is interesting** to me. Biology **interests** me.
- My paper **is an examination** of gender. My paper **examines** gender.
- The bell **is a symbol** of freedom. The bell **symbolizes** freedom.

### What are some ways that writers can edit their work to bring in more active voice?

As mentioned before, "be" verbs can be used as helping verbs and linking verbs as well as for constructing passive sentences.

#### Editing linking verbs

Many alternatives come from the five senses and bring some amount of subjectivity into writing, so make sure you use them appropriately.

Some examples: seem, appear, become, grow, remain, stay, prove, feel, look, smell.

- He **appears** angry.
- My argument **remains** unchanged.
- The evidence **becomes** crucial.

#### Editing helping verbs

We can return to a sample pair of sentences provided earlier in the handout.

- Biology **is interesting** to me. Biology **interests** me.

Here, we cut the "be" verb, "is," and rewrite and reposition "interesting" to create a more active sentence.

#### Editing passive sentences

You can change a *passive* sentence to an *active* sentence by simply moving the actor in the sentence from the end of the sentence to the beginning of the sentence.

- My appendix was taken out by my doctor. My doctor took out my appendix.