

2. VERB POWER

Nouns and **verbs** are the basic building blocks of any language. With nouns and verbs only, we could communicate with each other (although if we were that primitive, we wouldn't have much to say). All other parts of speech support nouns and verbs—that is, explain about them; show their relationships to other nouns and verbs; modify, nullify, connect, and describe.

You may remember learning about a class of verbs called **linking verbs**. The class is a small one: "is," "was," "were," "be," "am" and "are." We call these linking verbs because they "link" a noun with another word that describes or identifies it. Linking verbs are common. Underline all the linking verbs in this paragraph. You should find two, not counting the words in quotation marks.

Most verbs, however, show action, or tell what a noun *does*. Any verb to which the letters "-ing" can be joined is an **action verb**. Read down the list of words in Exercise 2-A below and mentally add "-ing" to each. Are they all action verbs? Even a verb like "sit," which isn't much of an action at all?

Look back at page 8 and notice the verbs I used for the paragraph about Washington: *wallow, battle, struggle, clutch, surging*—how do these words contribute to the picture?

I believe the biggest step a beginner can take toward better writing is to cultivate a large "garden" of action verbs. That is, learn lots of them, and use the clearest, sharpest verbs you know to express what you have to say. Many action verbs bristle with life—they sparkle, snap, roar, race, buzz, pop and shine. But beginning writers tend to settle for drab verbs, like "sit," "walk," and "have." These serve an important function in our language, but they lack power and expression.

EXERCISE 2-A. Below is a list of several basic actions. How many different ways could you think of to do these things? Try to write at least three sharp, lively verbs for each action, as shown by the example.

You don't have to pull them all out of your own head. Verbs are so important that I've made a list of some outstanding examples and included it in this book. First, think of as many **synonyms** (words of similar meaning) as you can by yourself. Then, when your mind quits, turn to page 107 and check the list. Choose the verbs you like best or those that seem most expressive to you.

crawl grovel, shimmy, creep, scramble, scoot

walk _____

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talk _____

run _____

sit _____

march _____

say _____

shout _____

jump _____

Another useful tool for these exercises, and for all your future writing, is a **thesaurus**. This is not, as the name suggests, a small breed of dinosaur. A thesaurus is a book, much like a dictionary, which lists synonyms instead of definitions for each word. If you don't have one in your house, ask for one. Say, "Mom and Dad, forget about that mountain bike or smartphone I asked for last month. What I *really* want for my birthday is a thesaurus."

EXERCISE 2-B. Reread the synonyms you wrote for "walk," "run" and "sit" in 2-A. In the following exercise, write sentences of your own using two of the synonyms you chose for each of those verbs. In each sentence, show what kind of person would walk, run or sit this particular way, and tell where he or she would do it.

EXAMPLE: crawl

(Type of person): The slave groveled

(Where he'd do it): before the king's throne.

(Type of person): The little boy scooted

(Where he'd do it): under the porch when his mother called.

Now it's your turn:

(walk) _____

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(run) _____

(sit) _____

Verbs can change the emotional impact of a sentence as quickly as you can write them. Compare these three sentences:

Jenna walked to the desk and picked up the vase.

Jenna stalked to the desk and grabbed the vase.

Jenna waltzed to the desk and hugged the vase.

Nothing is wrong with the first sentence--it simply tells what Jenna did with no emotional "punch." But if the writer is describing an angry scene, the second sentence gets the emotion across without even telling us "Jenna was angry." The *verbs* tell us, all by themselves. And in the last sentence the verbs alone tell us that Jenna is feeling ecstatic or triumphant.

EXERCISE 2-C. All the verbs in the following paragraph are straightforward and **neutral**. That is, they don't give us a clue how Sally feels--about Horace, about the stranger, or about the entire situation. Over the underlined words in the paragraph, write verbs that suggest Sally is feeling very sad. You may refer to the verb list on page 107 if you're stumped.

When the knock came, Sally walked to the door
and opened it. She looked at the stranger for a
few seconds, then said, "You're too late. Horace

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left an hour ago." Without another word, she closed the door.

Now, imagine that Sally has somehow tricked the stranger and is very pleased with herself. Fill in the blanks below with verbs that communicate her attitude.


When the knock came, Sally _____ to the door and opened it. She _____ at the stranger for a few seconds, then _____, "You're too late. Horace left an hour ago." Without another word, she closed the door.

✎ EXERCISE 2-D. Here are some more short paragraphs for you to rewrite. Decide for yourself how the main character is feeling (angry? joyful? excited? disappointed? sad?), then substitute verbs that express, or at least help to express, that emotion.

Ian ran across the street to where the policeman was standing. "Did you see that van?" he asked. "It must have been doing 90 miles an hour."

Bernice took a book from the shelf. "My aunt wrote this," she said. Then she walked across the room and placed the book on Kendra's lap.

The captain walked to Sergeant Bates and looked at him for a few seconds. "Do you know you're in officers' quarters?" he asked.

 **ANOTHER CAVEAT:** Words like "walked" or "said" are indispensable--the language can't do without them and neither can you. A close reading of any of your favorite books will show that the author uses lots of colorless, neutral verbs. The more verbs you can add to your vocabulary the better writer you will be, but at the same time, don't pepper your prose with so many explosive verbs it feels like a minefield. Experience will help you

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learn when and how to use those sparkling verbs you've added to your vocabulary. Keep cultivating your garden!



MORE PRACTICE: Think of your favorite board game. Write a paragraph or two explaining how to play the game, using as many strong action verbs as you can. Let your imagination run wild! For instance, instead of "Move your marker five spaces," write "Charge ahead five spaces and grind to a halt."

JUST FOR FUN. From your thesaurus or the verb list on page 107, choose a lively action verb for an ordinary activity, such as "sit" (straddle, perch, slouch) or "stand" (slump, pose, stoop, tense). Act out the verb and see if others can guess what it is.

2. SECRETS OF SUCCESSFUL SENTENCES

An effective writer strives for variety. The quickest way to kill a reader's interest is to begin all your sentences the same way and make them roughly the same length. To see what I mean, read this description:

(1) My room has pale blue walls and a yellow carpet on the floor. (2) It has a bed in the north corner. (3) I have a blue comforter on my bed. (4) My room has lots of pictures on the walls. (5) There is a dresser, and also a rocking chair and an exercise bike. (6) I like my room.

EXERCISE 2-A. If the writer *really* likes her room she could try to make it sound more interesting. Look carefully at the sentences that make up the above paragraph and list each subject and verb in the spaces below. Remember that a pronoun (such as "it") can be a subject.

(1)		(4)	
(2)		(5)	
(3)		(6)	

What's the main problem with this paragraph? Hint: Did you discover that "room" (or the stand-in pronoun "it") is the subject in three of the sentences? That "has" (or "have") is used *four times*? Four times is at least three times too many for such a weak verb. If you listed "there" as the subject of the fourth sentence, you were wrong, but it was an understandable mistake. The subject is actually "dresser," and "there" is an adverb (it tells *where*, remember?). "There" is also a wimpy sentence opener. The result of these flaws is a paragraph that could win prizes for descriptive writing at the National Boredom Festival. We'll shake up the sentences one at a time and startle some life into them, beginning with

My room has pale blue walls and a yellow carpet on the floor.

1. We'll make "walls" and "carpet" the subject, change the verb, and eliminate the useless phrase "on the floor." (Where else would a carpet be?)

Blue walls and a yellow carpet make my room bright and cheerful.
or, Blue walls and a yellow carpet brighten my room.

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2. The next two sentences could be combined and rearranged with some help from our friends, the preposition family:

In the north corner stands my bed, covered with a blue comforter.

3. Now we'll exchange a subject and verb again, and add details about the pictures:

Lots of pictures, mostly landscapes and horse posters,
decorate the walls.

4. Next we'll do away with the word "there," discard "also" and shape up the list:

Other furnishings include a dresser, a rocking chair and an
exercise bike.

or, A dresser, a rocking chair and an exercise bike fill the
empty spaces.

5. Finally, "I like my room" could be rewritten to tell the reader why this room is likeable.

My room is a comfortable place to be.

or, In my room I can relax and just be myself.

EXERCISE 2-B. Compare the above paragraph to the description of your living room that you wrote back in Part One. (You saved it, right? Remember to save all your assignments!) No doubt your nouns are terrific, but how are the sentences? What would you change about the paragraph? Rewrite your living room description, including the same information but changing the sentence structures. Feel free to experiment; try changing the subject, substituting an action verb for a linking verb, or opening with a prepositional phrase.



Part of the fun of learning to write is discovering ways to rearrange sentences. Let's experiment with a technique called **transformation**. This usually involves rearranging the subject and changing or altering the verb.

We'll start with a pattern that should be all-too-familiar by now, the "they have" or "it has" trap that often snares beginners when they write descriptions. The verb "has" works better with people than with things. "Tim has a leather jacket" makes more sense than "The jacket has two zipper pockets." Technically, a jacket or room or town cannot *have* anything in the sense of owning it. Here's a foolproof formula for escaping the trap:

object > **subject** - **"has"** > **V**

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That is, turn the object (the noun on the right side of the verb) into the subject and substitute a stronger verb (SuperVerb) for "has."

EXAMPLES: The clock face has two golden hands.
Two golden hands adorn the clock face.

The house has four windows in front.
Four windows on the front of the house stare unblinkingly at the street.

EXERCISE 2-C. Try transforming these "It has" sentences using the "foolproof formula" (Object > Subject; "has" > V). In each example, the underlined words will become the subject of the new sentence.

1. My room has a four-poster bed.

2. This cup has a broken handle.

3. Our backyard has a huge oak tree.

4. The parade will have four high school bands.

5. Pride Park has a huge swimming pool.

Starting a sentence with the word "There" is proper and correct, but beginning writers should never do it. This is because beginning writers tend to overdo it, and there is probably no weaker sentence construction in English than "There is." That's not to say that all your sentences have to be superheroes, but (once again) only after you learn to write strong sentences will you understand how to use the weaker ones.

For the duration of this course do *not* start a sentence with the words "There is." The easiest way to transform the "There is" construction is the same way you handled "It has": move the noun on the right side of the verb over to the left, thus transforming it into the subject. The linking verb "is" (or "are") can be retained, but with a little imagination you could do better.

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There is a chicken on the road.

Transformation A: A chicken is on the road.

Transformation B: A spotted hen pecks her way down the road.

Transformation A is okay, but doesn't tell us any more than the original sentence did. Transformation B is much better because it helps us see the chicken by showing us what she does (and adds detail with the concrete noun and the adjective).

Here's another example:

A: There are five boys in the family.

B. Five boys in the family make for a noisy household.

~~EXERCISE 2-D.~~ Using the "foolproof formula" again, transform these sentences to eliminate "There." Make the underlined words the subject, and try to substitute an action verb for "is," "are," or "was."

1. There is a fountain in the park.

2. There is a large public library in Smallville.

3. There was a hat with an ostrich plume on the shelf.

4. There was a giant on the other side of the hill.

5. There are three office buildings at the corner of Main and Strather.

Another way to transform sentences is by changing the **voice**. What do I mean? It may be easier to show than to explain.

3. SPECIAL PLACES

When I was growing up, I used to look forward to going downtown with my sisters to see a movie. After a forty-minute bus trip, during which the green lawns of the suburbs gave way to concrete and skyscrapers, we stepped down into the diesel fumes and busy sidewalks of the city. Our destination was one of the four downtown movie theaters, where thirty-five cents paid my way into another world.

The theaters sported names like "The Palace" and "The Majestic." Although decorating schemes varied, all relied on mirrors and carved wood, gilded plaster, dark velvets, and wide curving staircases to create a luxurious atmosphere. But each lobby smelled like movie theaters everywhere--a heavy mixture of cigarette smoke (people could smoke just about anywhere back then) and buttered popcorn.

We always headed for the first row of the balcony. While waiting for the movie to start, I rocked my squeaky, velvet-upholstered chair back and forth. The domed ceiling of the Majestic rose so high I made myself dizzy staring up into it. The soft crunch of the popcorn we nibbled while waiting has seemed ever since to be the very taste of anticipation. Finally the dim lights would darken, the projectors hum, the huge heavy curtains roll back from the screen with a whoosh, and the show began.

You know places that seem to rush at you with *feelings*. You walk into the dentist's office and the butterflies start fluttering in your stomach, even if you've only come to meet your sister. The gym where you practice basketball makes you tingle with a mixture of anxiety and excitement. The oak tree in your back yard wraps you in peace and contentment every time you climb to your special branch. These places are loaded with associations, with pleasant or unpleasant memories. Every time you smell wood smoke or hear the smack of a basketball on a hardwood floor, some of those memories come back.

✍️ EXERCISE 3-A. Read my description of the movie theater again. I retain emotional memories of theaters like the Majestic because I visited them for one purpose only: to see

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movies. They were places of anticipation, excitement, and escape from the everyday world. You may have noticed that the description is full of detail, and all of the details are sensory impressions. Write some of these details in the chart below. You should find at least one item to go in each column.

Sight	Sound	Smell	Touch	Taste

Our five senses are windows to the world of experience. Everything we know comes in through the senses and is processed through the brain. Your mind determines what you notice and what you remember and how you feel about it, but the information itself is the same for everyone.

You know what popcorn tastes like. You may also know the difference between home-popped popcorn and the slightly soft, over-salted, bright-yellow variety sold in movie theaters. If you do, you've shared part of my childhood movie-going experience. By mentioning the popcorn, I've opened a window between us, and that's where we meet. Because we connect over the popcorn, you can (I hope) read the rest of my description with interest because it has something to do with experiences familiar to you.

Suppose I had written this instead:

When I was growing up during the 1960s, going downtown to see a movie was a special Saturday treat. The theaters were much larger and more ornate than they are today. Even though television, still fairly new at the time, was supposed to be a threat to the motion picture industry, plenty of patrons attended the old-time movie theaters for afternoon matinees. Thirty-five cents was the price of admission for children under twelve, unless the feature was a special engagement--a "blockbuster" like Ben-Hur, for example. Then the price might be as high as seventy-five cents!

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It's a perfectly good paragraph, and if I were writing a report for school it might even get an "A." But it does not communicate any *feeling* of place to the reader. One reason it doesn't is because I took myself and my impressions out. For another, I included no sensory impressions--nothing for the reader to touch or smell. The paragraph may be interesting to someone who enjoys reading about the sixties, about movies, or about low prices in the "old days," but it has no emotional punch.

The communications company AT&T once used the advertising slogan, "Reach out and touch someone." That's your goal as a creative writer. It is through the senses that you reach out and touch your reader, even if your reader will never meet you personally.

Take a moment to look again at the Emily Dickinson poem on p. 51. We understand at once that she's describing a cold, gray winter day, but it may surprise you that she never uses the words "cold," "gray" or "winter" at all! Instead, the details she chooses to mention make us feel the "winterness" of her poem.

EXERCISE 3-B. Read examples #7 and #8 on p. 110 for two descriptions by students your age. Do you get a feeling for the places they described?

Think of a place that has particular and specific associations for you. Often the place affects you most at certain times or seasons--your kitchen on baking days, City Park during a snowfall, a night game at the softball field. Think about the things you see there, the sounds you hear, the smells you smell, the textures you feel. List as many as you can think of (at least one per category) on the chart:

Place: _____


Time of day: _____

Season of the year: _____

Sights	Sounds	Smells	Textures	Tastes

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"Taste" may be a hard one, unless you happen to be writing about a restaurant or kitchen. But keep in mind that you don't have to put anything in your mouth in order to taste it. Fear or nervousness can be "tasted" in a dry, prickly throat. Dust, rain and snow have distinctive tastes. Some smells are so powerful they almost register on your tongue. If you're a gum-chewer, the place that you're describing might be one where you typically chew gum. Think about it, and see if you can't put anything in that "taste" column before giving up.

 **ASSIGNMENT 3-A.** Write a description of the place, *double-spaced* (skip every other line) following these guidelines:

- a. Include at least one detail from each column in the chart.
- b. Use specific, concrete nouns for naming things.
- c. Tell where the place is, the time of day, and (if outdoors) the time of year.
- d. Avoid "it has" and "there is."
- e. Tell what your feelings are when you are in this place.

If you were able to fill your chart with details, you don't have to use all of them. Select the ones that mean most to you and are consistent with these guidelines. Your description could easily run to two double-spaced pages--don't try to cut it short. And **DON'T WORRY ABOUT SPELLING EVERYTHING CORRECTLY.** Spelling is important, but not for the first draft. Stopping to look up a word could halt your flow of ideas.



When you finish the assignment, go back and proofread according to the checklist on page 103. Now is the time to correct any spelling errors (look up the ones you're not sure of). Then go down the list of guidelines from *a.* to *e.* and make sure you included all of them in your description. Put your paper aside for a day or two.

I'm serious. Put the paper aside and do something else. If at least 24 hours pass since you