

**Advanced 3**  
**Unit 4 Language Focus 3**  
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**Avoiding Ineffective Verbs**

**AVOID “STATE OF BEING” VERBS**

Read through your paper and look for any forms of the verbs be, do, and have.

am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been  
do, does, did, doing, done  
have, has, had, having

These are verbs that reflect a state of being, rather than action. To spice up your writing, try to change at least some of those ‘state of being’ verbs to action verbs.

Examples:

**Poor:**

*The analyzed characteristics were the dry weight (DW), the loss on ignition (IL), as well as concentrations of total phosphorus (Ptot), total nitrogen (Ntot) and total carbon (Ctot).*

**Better:**

*The following characteristics were analyzed: the dry weight (DW), the loss on ignition (IL), as well as concentrations of total phosphorus (Ptot), total nitrogen (Ntot) and total carbon (Ctot).*

**Poor:**

*This has the tendency to make log browsing a tedious and ineffective process.*

**Better:**

*This tends to make log browsing a tedious and ineffective process.*

**Poor:**

He had a lot of clothes.

**Better:**

His clothes overflowed his closets.

**Poor:**

A bald eagle was overhead and now is low in the sky near me.

**Better:**

A bald eagle soared overhead and then dove low, seemingly coming right at me.

Notice that when we eliminate the state of being verb, the sentence gets much more interesting!

**AVOID VERBS FOLLOWED BY AN ADVERB**

Look for any places in your writing where a verb is followed by an adverb.

She walked slowly.

He ate quickly.

Replace these pairs of verbs and adverbs with a stronger verb that conveys the feeling of the adverb.

She dragged her feet.

He gulped his food.

### **AVOID “THERE IS/THERE ARE/IT IS” CONSTRUCTIONS**

Look through your paper and circle any sentence that begin with “There is” or “There are” or “It is.” These sentence openings can make your writing seem dull and repetitive. Try removing “There is” or “There are” to make your sentences more interesting.

**Poor:**

There is no harm using cellular phones inside the hospital.

**Better:**

Using cellular phones causes no harm inside the hospital.

**Poor:**

It is interesting to study literature.

**Better:**

The study of literature interests me.

As a rule, try to express yourself with action verbs instead of forms of the verb “to be.” Sometimes it is fine to use forms of the verb “to be,” such as “is” or “are,” but it is easy to overuse them (as in this sentence—twice). Overuse of such verbs results in dull writing.

Source:

<https://pressbooks.pub/roughwritersguide/chapter/using-strong-verbs/>

<http://sana.aalto.fi/awe/style/sentence/weakverbs/index.html#:~:text=Don't%20overuse%20weak%20verbs,harder%20to%20interpret%20your%20meaning.>

### **voiding Cliches in Writing**

Can you identify the trite, overused, and plain tired expressions in these 2 paragraphs?

*John Doe had been sleeping like the dead when his alarm clock screamed like a Banshee at him. It was 1:36 P.M., and John had planned to be up bright and early that morning. His eyelids were as heavy as lead as he wracked his brain for excuses. It had been the mother of all lost weekends. Now he had to pay the piper--he'd missed Core again, and the hand of doom was heavy upon his grade in the class.*

*In Friedrich Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morals, we see an epic battle being waged between systems of morality. Arrayed against him, like keepers of the flame, we have Nietzsche's mortal enemies, the guardians of Slave Morality. In the long run, these guardians of the tried-and-true morality have suppressed human instinct, Nietzsche trumpets to the reader.*

How did you do?

If you identified similes such as "like the dead," metaphors such as "keepers of the flame," and modifiers such as "bright and early" then you have a good eye for worn-out language. Sadly, many great phrases, such as "mother of all battles," are coined but quickly become overused. How many times did you get sick of hearing people say "Not!" a decade ago?

How do you identify and avoid cliches?

When writing, question any comparison or image you are about to use. Cliches often sneak in the barn door (that's a cliché, by the way) when we try to be descriptive. Is the phrase you're about to use one that you've heard frequently in casual conversation, newscasts, and advertising? If so, it is probably a cliché or on its way there.

Instead of using stock phrases and images, be creative--but beware! Using the thesaurus has many dangers, such as misusing a synonym that doesn't quite fit the meaning you want. Also, inventing your own colorful descriptions can lead you as far astray as any worn-out phrase. Finally, avoid "padding" your work with cliches. This is an effective way to increase the length of a paper, but not to increase your grades. Most professors know cliches when they see them.

Dr. Michael Spear, in our Department of Journalism, warns his students to avoid these journalistic phrases because they are so often overused. Many of them crop up in academic writing, too. We have added a few others to this (admittedly incomplete) list. Occasionally they have an ironic effect, or a reader might like them (this writer loves "sands of time") but usually faculty members mark them as inappropriate:

all walks of life	give the devil his due	never a dull moment
behind the eight ball	hook, line, and sinker	nipped in the bud
bitter end	by hook or crook	patience of Job
calm before the storm	in the nick of time	paying the piper
checkered career	in the same boat	sands of time
chomping at the bit	leaps and bounds	selling like hot cakes
cool as a cucumber	leave no stone unturned	stick out like a sore thumb
cry over spilled milk	lock, stock, and barrel	whirlwind tour
fall on deaf ears	long arm of the law	winds of change
from time immemorial	march of history	writing on the wall

Does this mean your writing must be boring?

Academic prose doesn't have to be boring. Some of the phrases in the Nietzsche example could be used:

In Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, we see an epic battle being waged between systems of morality. Nietzsche, angered by those who follow what he labels a "Slave Morality," claims that some religions suppress human instinct.

"Epic battle" is a colorful phrase that one doesn't hear every day. Good, active verbs help too--"battle. . .waged" has much more impact than would "there is a struggle that is enacted between. . . ."

Source:

<http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/clicheprint.html>