

## Providence Extension Program | Jacksonville Mandarin

### Core C Composition and American Literature

#### WW #2: Active vs. Passive Voice in Writing

Question: What's one of the most common words in the English language?

Answer: Some form of the verb "to be"

The "Be" verb lineup:

*Am Is Are Was Were Be Being Been*

None of these words will be unfamiliar to you. You use them all of the time. In fact, one of the reasons why many of us have to deliberately NOT use them in our writing stems from the fact that they come very naturally in our speech. If we were to remove all "be" verbs from our speaking, we would sound very stilted and formal. But our writing is another matter . . .

In writing, "be" verbs sound vague and ambiguous, not to mention wordy. Strong, action-oriented verbs make for more engaging communication.

Thinking grammatically, in your writing use simple present and simple past tense, avoiding the progressive tenses. Not sure what that means? Generally speaking, we use the *progressive* tense an action in *progress* is interrupted by something else. Take a look below:

*I was walking to the mailbox when I tripped on my untied shoelace.*

Progressive tense would be appropriate here. I was in the process of getting the mail when I tripped. However, without an action to interrupt, it doesn't make sense. I was walking to the mailbox . . . *what?* Something needs to happen for it to work! Instead, just say: I walked to the mailbox.

Here's another example:

Progressive tense: As Hester *is standing* on the scaffold and *is holding* her baby, the crowd *is looking* at her angrily.

Note the three, count 'em, THREE passive constructions in this sentence! Now watch them magically go away:

Simple present tense: As Hester *stands* on the scaffold and *holds* her baby, the crowd *looks* on angrily.

See the difference?

Use these four methods to help eliminate "be" verbs in your writing:

1. **Replace** a boring be verb with a more vivid action word.

The movie was frightening.                      vs.                      The movie frightened me.

2. **Move** an adjective from the predicate to the subject and add more information.

My puppy is adorable.                              vs.                              My adorable puppy . . .

3. **Transform** a noun or adjective into an action verb.

He was the writer of the book.                      vs.                              He wrote the book.

4. **Rearrange** the sentence: passive to active.

Our car was hit by a drunk driver.                      vs.                              A drunk driver hit our car.

Practice:

1. Larissa is a student of history and psychology.

---

2. Monica was waiting impatiently at the airport for her sister to arrive from Paris.

---

3. The intended purpose of the lecture was to teach students effective time management.

---

4. Janet Smith is the supervisor of the customer service department.

---

5. In the distance there is a giant eruption from the water, as a 100-pound sailfish jumps out.

---

6. Walt Disney was the initiator of a mass movement in family entertainment.

---

7. The shipped product was different from the one that was advertised in the catalog.

---

8. Being lazy and sloppy, Mark never makes his bed.

---