

THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS CENTER

at **Sam Houston**
STATE UNIVERSITY

The Verb “To Be”

The verb “be” can be conjugated into the forms charted below. No matter the particular incarnation of it, the word really only means that something...is, which is to say, that it exists or is in a particular state of being. This is boring. When the verb of a sentence notes only that the subject “is,” very little is communicated. While some uses of “to be” verbs work well, many appearances of the verbs can be manipulated to achieve a more descriptive, tighter language.

Conjugations of the Verb “To Be”

am	is	are	be
being	been	was	were

Common Uses and Alternatives

A purely adjectival sentence

“Movies are fun.”

All this says is what movies are like. It does not say anything about how movies manage to be “fun” or what movies do while being “fun.” To make this sentence stronger, you can remove the “to be” verb and use these alternatives:

Take the adjective and use it along with the subject in a more thoughtful sentence

“Fun movies provide an escape from the tedium of work and school.”

No longer just “in a state of being fun,” movies in this sentence do something: they “provide an escape.”

Upgrade your adjectives, too, to move toward a more involving sentence

“Full of explosions, laughs, or love, movies entertain audiences who elsewhere face the tedium of work or school.”

This is a long way from the original sentence. Here, movies are described with specifics and then “perform” a verb, “entertain,” that entails much more than mere “being.”

“To be” verbs in the passive voice

“The Harry Potter books have been read by children and parents alike.”

Notice who does what in this sentence: The children and parents read. The books do nothing.

Instead, activate the sentence by moving the “doer” (the agent) to the subject position

“Children and parents alike have read the Harry Potter books.”

“To be” verbs in unnecessarily progressive formations

“Then I was running to the endzone.”

The important, action-packed verb is “running.” The pointless word is “was.”

Instead, drop the helping verb and the –ing (and alter the verb as needed)

“Then I ran to the endzone.”

Another example

“When she discusses epistemology, Jones is referring to issues of knowledge.”

Convert the clause to describe the subject, then follow up with the main clause in which the subject performs an active verb

“Referring to issues of knowledge, Jones discusses epistemology.”