

Proofreading Skills Tutorial:

Tutorial #13:
Sentence Focus

Using Active Voice
Using Concrete Nouns as Subjects
Eliminating Unnecessary *There* + *To Be* Structures

Writing Center
English 800 Center

All notes and exercises should be done on separate sheets of paper, which you will bring to your conference with an instructor in the center.

As you work through the tutorial, make sure to see an instructional aide at the front desk in the Writing Center or English 800 Center if you have any questions or difficulties.

Sentence Focus: The Cornerstone of Good Writing

Strong sentence focus means using vivid, active verbs and choosing concrete nouns to serve as the grammatical subjects of sentences. If your sentences are focused, your writing will be clear, direct, and concise.

This tutorial will demonstrate three strategies for ensuring strong sentence focus:

1. **using active voice,**
2. **using concrete nouns as subjects,**
3. **eliminating unnecessary *there + to be* structures.**

Using Active Voice

Active sentences tend to follow the word order *who does what*, as shown in the following example:

<i>subject</i>	<i>verb</i>	
Jamie	throws the ball.	
<i>who</i>	<i>does</i>	<i>what</i>

In the active sentence, the grammatical subject, “Jamie,” is the agent of the verb. This means that the subject *does* the verb; that is, Jamie *does* the throwing.

Here’s another example:

<i>subject</i>	<i>verb</i>	
The students	conducted	the chemistry experiment.
<i>who</i>	<i>did</i>	<i>what</i>

In this active sentence, the grammatical subject, “students,” is the agent of the verb. This means that the subject *did* the verb; that is, the students *did* the conducting.

In contrast, passive sentences tend to follow this pattern:

<i>subject</i>	<i>verb</i>	
The ball	is thrown	by Jamie.
<i>what</i>	<i>is done</i>	<i>by whom</i>

<i>subject</i>	<i>verb</i>	
The chemistry experiment	was practiced	by the students.
<i>what</i>	<i>was done</i>	<i>by whom</i>

Notice that in both sentences, the grammatical subjects (“the ball” and “the experiment”) are not the agents of the verbs. That is, the subjects don’t *do* the verb. The ball doesn’t *do* the throwing and the experiment didn’t *do* the conducting. Readers usually prefer active sentences over passive ones because active sentences are clearer and more concise and direct.

Of course, sometimes we need to use passive sentences, especially when we don’t know the answer to the “who” part of “who does what.”

For example,

(X)	stole	my car.
<i>who</i>	<i>did</i>	<i>what</i>

We can put the word *someone* in place of X,

Someone	stole	my car.
<i>who</i>	<i>did</i>	<i>what</i>

or we can use the passive pattern:

My car	was stolen.	
<i>what</i>	<i>was done</i>	<i>by whom</i>

When we don’t know the agent of the verb, the passive pattern is a good choice. But most often, a passive sentence simply demonstrates weak sentence focus. Consider these examples:

Weak focus:	The exam was taken by the students.
	<i>what was done by whom</i>

Stronger:	The students took the exam.
	<i>who did what</i>

Weak focus:	The material was reviewed by the class to prepare for the exam.
	<i>what was done by whom</i>

Stronger:	The class reviewed the material to prepare for the exam.
	<i>who did what</i>

Principle I. Whenever possible, use active sentences rather than passive ones. That is follow the word order *who does what*.

Exercise 1

Instructions: The sentences in the following exercise tell a story about Bob and Roberta Roberts. Using Principle I, rewrite the sentences to improve the sentence focus. Some sentences may contain one or more clauses that need stronger focus, while others may be fine as they are written. Write “**ok**” if the sentences already demonstrate strong sentence focus.

Note: If a sentence is poorly focused with a passive verb, the actual subject may not be stated in the sentence. If a sentence does not seem to contain a logical subject, you may need to assume or create a subject for that sentence. The first sentence is revised for you as an example.

1. A new car was bought by Bob Roberts for his 20-car garage.

Bob Roberts bought a new car for his 20-car garage.

2. A new BMW was wanted by his wife, Roberta Roberts, to match her fox stole, but new models were not made in lavender.
3. In the end, a white Mercedes Benz was purchased with leather seats, pearl inlay on the dash, and a 25-CD changer in the trunk.
4. One year later, the car had been driven twice by the Roberts.
5. It was realized by Bob that driving his Honda Civic was loved by him.

Using Concrete Nouns as Subjects

Strong sentence focus means not only using vivid, active verbs but also choosing concrete nouns to serve as the grammatical subjects of sentences. A concrete subject (for example, book, baseball, person, Mom) is something you could touch, whereas an abstract subject (for example, faith, anger, kindness) is an idea. Abstract subjects tend to force the use of the *to be* verb (*am, are, is, was, were, been*) and can make writing very difficult to understand.

Let’s consider some examples of abstract subjects. Identify the verbs and underline the subjects of each of the following three examples.

Lana’s hope is to earn an “A” in her history class.

His appearance was snappy and elegant.

The suffering of laboratory animals is needless.

What do you notice about the verbs?

What do you notice about the subjects?

You probably realized that the verbs are all *to be* verbs. Did you notice the strong, active verbs buried as nouns in the subjects? Many times in the abstract subject we find what really should be the verb of the sentence. In the first example, the subject “Lana’s hope” contains the strong, vivid verb *hope*.

We can rewrite this sentence as follows:

Lana *hopes* to earn an “A” in her history class.

The same is true of the second and third examples, which can be rewritten as follows:

He *appeared* snappy and elegant.

Laboratory animals *suffer* needlessly.

Notice that changing the abstract subjects (“Lana’s hope,” “his appearance,” and “the suffering”) to concrete ones (“Lana,” “he,” and “animals”) forced us to use active verbs: *hope* instead of *is*; *appeared* instead of *was*, and *suffer* instead of *is*. The strong sentence focus makes the sentences more concise, direct, and easy to understand.

Principle II. Use concrete or specific nouns as the subjects of sentences rather than abstract, general nouns. Make the logical *topic* of the sentence the *grammatical subject* of the sentence.

By using **Principle II**, we create sentences that give our reader a strong mental image of what we are trying to communicate.

Exercise 2

Instructions: Using Principle II, rewrite the following sentences, using concrete subjects. Some sentences may contain two or more clauses that need stronger focus, while others may be fine as they are written. Write “**ok**” if the sentences already demonstrate strong sentence focus. The first sentence is revised for you.

Note: If a sentence is poorly focused with a passive verb, the actual subject may not be stated in the sentence. If a sentence does not seem to contain a logical subject, you may need to assume or create a subject for that sentence.

1. My mom’s biggest worry was for my safety.

My mom worried for my safety.

2. Dustin’s greatest fear was of spiders.

3. My use of Tylenol is to control my headaches.

4. The appeal of the candidate was to the gay/lesbian community.

5. The result that he hoped to achieve was convincing his parents to allow him to have a party Friday night.

6. The intention of Louisa was to arrive on time for class.

Eliminating Unnecessary *there + to be* Structures

Here are examples of appropriate uses of *there + to be*, which simply show that something exists.

There are 25 students in the class.

There is one duck on the pond.

There were three meetings today.

Now consider the following example:

There *is* a need for some students to study harder for the next exam.

In this sentence, the purpose of the sentence is *not* to show the existence of the students. It is to show that some students must study harder for the exam. In this sentence, *there + to be* are empty words that don't give the reader a concrete picture of what the writer is trying to communicate. If we rewrite the sentence to improve the sentence focus, the writing becomes more concise, and direct and easier to understand.

Some students *need* to study harder for the next exam.

Here is another example of how to improve the focus of a sentence using *there + to be* incorrectly:

Weak focus: There *are* many studies indicating that cramming for tests does not work.

Stronger: Many studies *indicate* that cramming for tests does not work.

Principle III: Avoid over-using the *there + to be* construction. Use *there + to be* only when you want to say that something exists.

Exercise 3

Instructions: Using Principles I, II, and III, rewrite the following sentences to improve sentence focus. Some sentences may contain two or more clauses that need stronger focus, while others may be fine as they are written. Write “**ok**” if the sentences already demonstrate strong sentence focus.

Note: If a sentence is poorly focused with a passive verb, the actual subject may not be stated in the sentence. If a sentence does not seem to contain a logical subject, you may need to assume or create a subject for that sentence.

1. There is a thorough inspection of the engine done by the pilot before take off.
2. Because of the Republican Congress, there were important goals that Obama did not accomplish during his first term in office.
3. There were three bees in the kitchen.
4. There was strong agreement among the students that the best candidate for student body president was Uto.
5. There are many doctors who worry about the spread of tuberculosis throughout California.
6. There are many students that don't understand the principles of sentence focus.

Exercise 4

Instructions: Using the three principles of strong sentence focus, revise the following sentences, which when combined make a paragraph about the gorilla (adapted from information found in the Gorilla Foundation website: <http://www.koko.org/foundation>). Some sentences may contain one or more clauses that need stronger focus, while others may be fine as they are written. Write “ok” if the sentences already demonstrate strong sentence focus.

Note: If a sentence is poorly focused with a passive verb, the actual subject may not be stated in the sentence, and you may need to assume or create a subject for that sentence.

1. Gorillas are gentle and intelligent creatures.
2. However, because of the actions of male gorillas protecting their groups with such determination from hunters, there is a folklore developed by humans about the ferocity of gorillas.
3. Like all tightly knit social groups, their young are defended by gorillas, and they defend them with their lives.
4. Their babies are cared for by adult gorillas with great affection, patience, and playfulness.
5. Gorillas are generally quiet, and they are not physically capable of making the same sounds as humans; however, about 25 distinct noises are generated by them.
6. There are laws that have been passed by many countries protecting the gorillas.
7. There is agreement by most zoos around the world not to purchase gorillas from the wild.

Exercise 5

Instructions: Using the three principles of good sentence focus, revise the paragraphs below. Some sentences may contain two or more clauses that need stronger focus, while others may be fine as they are written.

Note: If a sentence is poorly focused with a passive verb, the actual subject may not be stated in the sentence. If a sentence does not seem to contain a logical subject, you may need to assume or create a subject for that sentence.

Abraham Lincoln is judged by many historians as the greatest President in American history because of the way leadership was exercised by him during the Civil War.

The son of a Kentucky frontiersman, Lincoln had to struggle for a living and for learning. There were extraordinary efforts made by Lincoln to attain knowledge while working on a farm, splitting rails for fences, and keeping store at New Salem, Illinois. There were eight years spent by him in the Illinois legislature. His law partner said of him, "His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest."

When he was President, the Republican Party was built by him into a strong national organization. Further, he rallied most of the northern Democrats to the Union cause. On January 1, 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation was issued by him; it declared that those slaves within the Confederacy would be forever free. Lincoln never let the world forget that the Civil War involved an even larger issue. This was stated by him most movingly when he dedicated the military cemetery at Gettysburg: "that these dead shall not have died in vain--that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom--and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

There was a re-election won by Lincoln in 1864, as the Union military heralded an end to the war. In his planning for peace, the President was flexible and generous, encouraging Southerners to lay down their arms and join speedily in reunion.

On Good Friday, April 14, 1865, Lincoln was assassinated at Ford's Theatre in Washington by John Wilkes Booth, an actor, who somehow thought he was helping the South.

--Adapted from *The Presidential biographies on WhiteHouse.gov*

Exercise 6

Instructions:

1. Review a classroom essay that you are working on, and incorporate good sentence focus in your own writing.
2. Look back at the principles and exercises in this tutorial and make notes on a separate sheet of paper. You will bring these notes and the essay to your conference.
3. Make an appointment for a conference with an instructor in the Writing Center (18-104) or English 800 Center (18-102). To make this appointment, stop by the Centers or call (650) 574-6436. During this appointment, the professor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your answers to these exercises, and check to see if you can incorporate the skill into your writing.

Reminder:

For this appointment, bring

- any notes about the tutorial that you have taken
- your completed tutorial exercises
- and the essay