



Verb Choice

The particular verb you choose and the way it's integrated into the clause are important. As the basic principle, you want (other things being equal) to maximize your use of intransitive and transitive active verbs and minimize the use of transitive passive and linking verbs. Study these illustrations:

INTRANSITIVE

I walk.

While you can modify this intransitive verb with an adverb, it takes neither an object nor a complement as part of the main clause structure. Structurally, it's complete in itself (S-V) and pretty clear and direct.

TRANSITIVE ACTIVE

I hit the ball.

This transitive active verb takes a direct object (*ball*) to receive the action (expressed in the verb *hit*) performed by the actor (*I*, in the subject slot). The sentence is clear and economical because this transitive relationship (actor-action-passive recipient) moves directly through the sentence in the same way the reader reads it.

But TRANSITIVE PASSIVE (using the recipient as the subject) has two main problems. *The ball was hit by me.*

First, it's wordy. The auxiliary (*was*) needed to render the verb passive, tighter with the preposition (*by*) needed to clarify the logical relation to the actor (*me*), increases the length by 50% with no corresponding increase in the meaning.

Second, the transitive relationship is now moving backwards through the sentence. The reader is moving left to right through the sentence, but all the action is moving back right to left. Several such sentences in a row will tire the reader; unless you really don't know the identity of the actor or have some really clear-cut need to cast recipient as subject, stick with the transitive active. Recast *The ball was hit by me* into *I hit the ball*.

LINKING

Crim is the tutor of his regular students.

In this clause, the linking verb (*is*) states logical equivalence between the subject (*Crim*) and the subjective complement (*tutor*). This structure is pretty direct, but it also has two problems.

First, this verb is DULL – it lacks both action and motion. A whole page of these will put your reader to sleep.

Second, this verb choice offers too little economy: you've used your only main verb slot and filled it with a verb that, on a scale of meaningfulness from 1-10, rates about a 2. Also, the important idea of the students gets buried in a modifier a level below the main clause structure. Better might be:

Crim tutors his regular students.

This choice gives a more direct and compact cast to the whole idea.

If, as sometimes happens, you find this idea thwarted by a need to keep *tutor* as a noun rather than a verb (say it's *Crim*'s official title), you can resort to

Crim serves as a tutor for his regular students.

This new clause, though as long as the original, may read a bit shorter because the verb now has a bit of action and motion.

Passive Voice and Linking Verb Exercises

Rid these sentences of passive verbs:

The chicken was run over by the truck.

Ways to make the economy more fair, guarantee justice to all, and save the environment were all covered expertly in the Democratic platform.

A singing of *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* was featured during the seventh-inning stretch.

The incoming college president was paid a salary easily twice that of his predecessor.

The rewriting of this sentence should be found easy by you.

It is well known that the world is round.

Rid these sentences of linking verbs:

The degradation of women has been a feature of some societies.

There are many who claim that a President lacking in judgment should be impeached.

It is clear that Congress will shirk its responsibility.

The reason that Wilson opposed the Republican amendments to the treaty was his knowledge that their passage would wreck his proposed League.

With tension between the British and the colonists at the high levels they were at the time, conflict was inevitable.

Even the suspicion of unethical behavior was enough to warrant removal from the real estate profession.