# Verb Choice

Verbs form the bedrock of English prose. Every sentence and every clause in English is built around a verb (an action or a state of being) and a subject that performs that action. Along with indicating what action takes place, verbs also tell us who or what acts and what object they act on as well as when the action takes place and for how long. If you want to improve the style, clarity or concision of your writing, you need to pay attention to what verbs you choose.

## Being Verbs, Transitive Verbs, and Intransitive Verbs (Action)

* **Being Verbs** are all forms of the verb “to be” (am, are, is, were). They indicate a state of being or existence rather than any specific action. Being verbs can be followed by predicate nominatives or predicate adjectives (sometimes called subject complements) **SV(PN/PA)** Being verbs work like an equal sign, so the PN or PA will either be equivalent to or will modify the subject of the sentence. For example, “Bill is my brother” or “We are lost.”
* **Transitive Verbs** transfer an action from the subject of the sentence to the direct object. In other words, they tell us that a subject performs an action on the direct object. Transitive verbs must be followed by a direct object. If a sentence has an indirect object, it will come between the transitive verb and its direct object. **SV (io)DO** For example, “Sean grilled a steak” or “Liz sent John an email.”
* **Intransitive Verbs** indicate a specific action, but they do not transfer their action to a direct object. They indicate actions like thinking or walking that are not performed on any identifiable object. Intransitive verbs are often followed by prepositional phrases that help complete the action. **SV** For example, “The vase shattered” or “Sam heard about intransitive verbs.”

Some verbs have **both transitive and intransitive forms**, and those different forms often have significantly different meanings. For instance, the verb “to smell” indicates a very different thing in the intransitive “Mark smelled” than in the transitive “Mark smelled the flowers.”

## Tense and Aspect (Time and Duration)

**Tense** indicates time and can be past, present or future. **Aspect** indicates duration (whether the action is completed, ongoing, recurrent, etc.) and can be simple, perfect, progressive, or perfect progressive. All verbs have both tense and aspect, and we use aspect+tense to describe a verb’s action: i.e., past perfect, present progressive, etc. (For a detailed description of tense and aspect, see the University Writing Center’s handout “Verb Tense and Aspect”) Most academic writing uses the present tense to refer to texts, no matter when they were written. In general, you should avoid unexpected or accidental shifts in verb tense. Be careful not to confuse the auxiliary verbs used to make complex tenses with either a being verb or a passive voice construction.

## Active and Passive (Voice)

The voice of a verb indicates its relationship to the grammatical subject of a sentence. Subjects perform the action of an **active voice** verb, but they receive the action of a verb in the **passive voice**. The classic example of passive voice looks something like this: “The ball was hit (by Bill)” (passive) vs. “Bill hit the ball” (active). Because the passive voice takes more words and obscures the actor in the sentence, many disciplines advise you to write in the active voice. Some disciplines recommend using the passive voice to highlight the action performed over the actor who performed it (see our “Tips for Writing Lab Reports” and “Editing Lab Reports” handouts for examples; see our handout on “Passive Voice” for advice on changing passive constructions into the active voice).

## Number and Person (Agreement)

According to the conventions of Edited Academic English, verbs must agree with their subjects in number (singular or plural) and person (first person, second person, third person). However, subject-verb agreement conventions vary across different forms of English. African American English (AAE), for example, has different conventions for subject-verb agreement from those listed below. Despite being equally coherent and logical to Edited Academic English in its conventions, however, AAE is discouraged by many college instructors. The following review of subject-verb agreement conventions in Edited Academic English can help students meet instructor expectations, though these conventions should not be understood as superior or more correct than those of AAE or other forms of English.

**Number** indicates whether the subject is singular (one) or plural (two or more). Number agreement is mostly an issue with irregular verbs like “to be” and “to have.” You can consult a writer’s handbook or a number of online sources for the conjugations of irregular verbs. Note that compound subjects joined by “and” typically take plural verbs. For example, “Mark and Li are cooking dinner tonight.”

It is easiest to understand **person** by thinking of pronouns. **First person** (I, me, we, us) refers to the speaker or the speaker plus at least one more person, **second person** (you) refers to the person being addressed, and **third person** (he, him, she, her, they, them, their) refers to one or more person(s) who is neither the speaker nor the person being addressed. While regular verbs do not change with person, verbs with **third person singular** subjects add a final -*s*. For example, “Most cats hate water, but my cat loves it.”

## Phrasal Verbs (Verbs with Prepositions)

Some verbs change their meaning significantly when followed by certain prepositions. For example, the verb “look” means many different things when followed by “down,” “down on,” “up,” “up to” or “into.” We call these verb+preposition pairs “phrasal verbs.” You can find extensive lists in phrasal-verb dictionaries, advanced learners dictionaries, dictionaries of American idioms and in a number of online resources.

## Choosing Strong Verbs

**Clear, concise, forceful writing requires well-chosen verbs**. Choosing strong verbs clarifies your language for your readers, and, by forcing you to think carefully about what you are saying, it can help you better understand your own ideas. It is often easier to rewrite a sentence or portion of a sentence around your new verb than it is to try finding a perfect one-to-one substitution for a weak verb.

* Use transitive or intransitive verbs, sometimes called “**action verbs**,” as much as possible and save “being verbs” for when they are absolutely necessary. For example, “Gourmets are food lovers” is not as strong a choice as “Gourmets love food.” Notice that the action verb “love” used to replace the being verb “are” was already implied in the original sentence by the noun “lovers.” **Concrete action verbs often hide in plain sight**, so check your sentence for the action you need to describe and make sure the central verb expresses that action.
* Choose **specific action verbs** for the actions you are describing. Because they can describe a wide variety of actions, common action verbs like “to use” and “to have” can hide the real action of your sentences. For instance, “I used a hammer to drive nails into the shingles” is not as strong as either “I hammered the nails into the shingles” or “I drove the nails into the shingles with a hammer.” While too much creativity in verb choice can be distracting in certain contexts, you should choose the most specific verb appropriate for your writing context.
* In a **complex sentence**, the verb at the center of your **independent** clause should carry the main action of the sentence. By definition, the main action should not take place in a subordinate clause. (For more on complex sentences, see our “Sentence Structure” handout.)