



THE UNIVERSITY  
WRITING CENTER  
3211 HHRA BUILDING

## WEAK VS. STRONG VERBS

*Related Handouts:* See PASSIVE AND ACTIVE VOICE

### THE PRINCIPLE

The verb TO BE is the most commonly used verb in the English language. It comes in many forms: *am, are, is, was, were, will be, has been, have been, had been, etc.* We use it to state the existence or condition of something:

Downtown Greensboro **is** a more interesting place today than it **was** a year ago.

We also use forms of TO BE and TO HAVE as auxiliary verbs to show a variety of time frames – in this example, moving from present to past to future:

Downtown Greensboro **is** changing. With all the new bars and clubs that **have** opened, someone **will soon be** leading groups of tourists on guided pub crawls.

### THE PROBLEM

The problem is that habitual use of BE and HAVE can make writing dull and wordy. Substituting stronger, more expressive verbs can both brighten and trim a person's writing style. Consider the difference between these two paragraphs:

After many attempts to “revive” downtown Greensboro, it finally appears **to be** happening. Streets that **were** once empty after dark **are** now bustling with activity – or at least they **are** showing signs of life. There **are** now clubs and bars lining Elm Street and the surrounding area, and they **are** full of twenty- and thirty- somethings. A slightly older crowd **has been** lured downtown by new art galleries, and live performances **are** now offered at two theaters. There **are** a few fine restaurants that **have** before- and after-theater specials. There **is** also a new park in the middle of town that **has** live concerts on a regular basis. Some lunch-hour performances **are** held there, and many downtown workers **have been** attracted to them. Young families **are** also discovering downtown, thanks in large part to the Children's Museum that **has been** open for a few years and the baseball stadium, which **is** brand new and which **has** a playground that **is** loved by kids.

After many attempts to “revive” downtown Greensboro, it finally appears **to be** happening. Streets that once stood empty after dark now bustle with activity – or at least show signs of life. Clubs and bars full of twenty- and thirty- somethings line Elm Street and the surrounding area. New art galleries and two theaters offering live performances **have** lured a slightly older crowd downtown, where they can find before- or after-theater specials at a few fine restaurants. A new park in the middle of town hosts live concerts on a regular basis, including some lunch-hour performances that attract many downtown workers. Young families **are** also discovering downtown, thanks in large part to the Children's Museum that opened a few years ago and the brand new baseball stadium with a playground that kids love.

## THE SOLUTION

The second version of our test paragraph is leaner by 31 words, and the number of BE and HAVE verbs has shrunk from 19 to 3. As a result, the writing dances to a livelier tune. Admittedly, the verbs are not the only thing that has changed, but the process of changing them has inspired and enabled other changes as well. Here are some specific ways that you can *turn weak verbs into stronger ones*, making your prose more muscular:

- 1) Use your imagination to substitute more interesting words:

Streets that once **stood** empty    instead of    Streets that **were** once empty.  
A new park . . . **hosts** concerts    instead of    **has** concerts.

- 2) Whenever possible, use **active** instead of **passive** verbs:

New art galleries and two theaters offering live performances **have lured** a slightly older crowd downtown.

One active verb instead of the two passive verbs in the original:

A slightly older crowd **has been lured** downtown by new art galleries, and live performances **are now offered** at two theaters.

A playground that kids **love** (active); a playground that **is loved** by kids (passive).

- 3) Try not to start sentences with “there is” or “there are.”

Clubs and bars **line** Elm Street                      works better than  
**There are** clubs and bars lining Elm Street.

A new park **hosts** live concerts    beats    **There is** a new park that **has** live concerts.

- 4) Use the simple present tense instead of present progressive (she **listens** instead of she **is listening**) and the simple past tense instead of past progressive (she **listened** instead of she **was listening**) unless you really need to show that the action is continuing (as you might, for example, in a sentence like “She is learning to play the piano” or “She was driving home when she heard the news”).

Streets now **bustle** with activity – or at least **show** signs of life    is stronger than  
Streets **are** now **bustling** with activity – or at least they **are showing** signs of life.

- 5) Whenever possible, embed the description of something in an adjective before a noun, instead of dragging out the sentence with a noun and a “to be” verb phrase that includes an adjective:

The **brand-new** baseball stadium                      is more compact than  
The baseball stadium **which is brand new**

No one would suggest that you eliminate all forms of the verbs TO BE or TO HAVE from your writing. But with a little ingenuity and effort you can probably become less dependent on them. Try this experiment: underline all forms of TO BE and TO HAVE in a paragraph you have written, and then see how many of them you can change.