

The Most Powerful Words in Your Writing ...

By Will Newman

"The first draft of anything is ..."

? Ernest Hemingway

I'm not going to finish Ernest Hemingway's quote. But I'm sure you know his fondness for being blunt and using Anglo-Saxon four-letter words. So you can imagine what the final word in that quote is.

Hemingway's point is that your first draft is *never* good enough. You must revise.

Easier said than done. Where do you begin?

Follow master copywriter Jen Stevens' lead and begin with your verbs.

Verbs provide forward movement to your writing. Strong verbs add excitement to what you have to say. Weak verbs deflate that excitement.

Jen offers these three strategies for strengthening your verbs.

1. Banish "is" and its buddies ...

You can't write without using "is" or one of the other forms of the verb "to be": am, are, was, and were. But these verbs don't give a good visual picture of what you're trying to portray. You want to use verbs that describe an action or create a visual image.

For example, let's say you want to get your reader to understand the antioxidant power of dandelion tea. So you say, "Dandelion tea is a powerful antioxidant." This is your main idea ... but it lacks punch.

By eliminating the verb "is," you're forced to look for a better, more visual alternative. "Dandelion tea *destroys* cellular oxidants that threaten your health."

You reap another benefit when you replace forms of "is." Doing this encourages you to enliven what you're going to say almost without thinking of it. Once I wrote, "Dandelion tea destroys cellular oxidants," the second part of the sentence flowed naturally.

When you replace "is" with more active verbs, you have to decide which verbs to use. You want those verbs to be as powerful as possible. That brings us to Jen's second strategy.

2. Pack power into your verbs ...

Consider this sentence: "He hit the ball over the fence." Compare it with: "He smashed the baseball over the fence."

Both sentences describe the same act. The first one sounds as if the baseball barely cleared the fence. The second one makes it sound like Babe Ruth ripped the skin off the baseball when he hit it.

Your choice of verbs will carry much different images in your writing. Here are some more examples:

- Michael went down the hall.
- Michael lumbered down the hall.
- Michael skipped down the hall.
- Michael tore down the hall.
- Michael tottered down the hall.

You don't get much of an image when you write "went." If you use the word "lumbered," you get the image of Michael being maybe a bit chunky. "Skipped" gives the image of Michael being happy about something. When you use "tore," you give the sense of urgency without having to use the adverb "urgently."

And "tottered"? I bet when you read that, you got the image of Michael being either very old or very young.

The right verb does the work of adjectives, adverbs, and extended descriptions.

Jen has one additional foolproof verb-strengthening strategy ...

3. Banish "there is" and "there are" ...

I use these two phrases – "there is" and "there are" – frequently in my first draft. I have no problem doing that. Using them allows me to keep my writing process moving along smoothly.

But these two phrases deaden your copy. The good news: You can eliminate them easily, because everything you need to write a stronger sentence usually follows those phrases.

Look at the following example ...

- **Instead of ...** There is a new and powerful formula that will relieve the stiffness and strain in your joints fast and for hours.
- **Try ...** A new and powerful formula relieves the stiffness and strain in your joints fast and for hours.

Everything you needed to strengthen that sentence was already in it. Once you eliminated "there is," all you needed to do was tweak the verb from "will relieve" to "relieves," and you have a more direct, more visual sentence.

Okay, now it's your turn. Take a look at the following sentence and see how you would eliminate "there is" or "there are" to strengthen it:

- There are three strategies you can use to strengthen your writing by strengthening your verbs.

One last, crucial strategy for strengthening your writing ...

I'm repeating myself. But that's okay.

Don't worry about using Jen's strategies on your first draft. Just write. Get what you have to say down on the paper (or more correctly, on your computer screen).

Then, when you do your first of several revisions, look for forms of the verb "to be." Eliminate as many of them as you can.

At the same time, you can cast out "there is" and "there are."

Having done that, it's now time for your second revision. Go back and strengthen *all* your verbs. Make them do the work they're capable of.

Until next week: Keep reading and keep writing.

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5 Responses to "The Most Powerful Words in Your Writing..."

Best tips ever!

CK Williams – over a year ago

Brilliant Will.

Tusen Tusen Takk (thousand thousand thanks)

Tim the Viking – over a year ago

Yes, It's easier to remember to do the action vs. remembering the rules. jenbobby34- 6

jenbobby34- 6 – over a year ago

Thank so much, just 3 rules that will save the life of a desperate writer.

Guest (Susan) – over a year ago

Hey New Man, you have changed me into a new man too. Wow, that was an excellent article, being a novice writer I was not able to bring that taste in my writings. Now I have learnt what I need to do, is eliminate IS and bring the words that produce the imaginary among readers. Love you Brother...Thanks a lot...

Guest (PK Rohira) – over a year ago

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