

### Don't Misuse the Verb "to be"

Some words that are useful and effective in most situations can be troublesome in others. An example is the verb "to be." Although one of the most used and most useful verbs in the English language, it also lends itself to misuse that detracts from effective technical writing.



As a link that establishes identity between nouns (the so-called predicate nominative), "to be" is indispensable. Examples of this effective use of "to be" are:

- Volunteer corn plants *are* weeds.
- Orobanche *is* a parasite.
- Franklin D. Roosevelt *was* president in 1940.

The verb "to be" helps form the tenses that some English verbs lack. How do we form the future tense of "may"? We simply can't say "He shall may go." Rather we say, "He shall *be* permitted to go." In such cases, "to be" is indispensable.

Verbs in the English language can be used in the present progressive tense. Not all languages have this very descriptive and useful construction, which shows that an action is taking place right now. Only the verb "to be" is used to form this tense. Examples are:

- The seedlings *are* emerging.
- The storm *was* approaching when we arrived.
- The leaves *are* falling.

"To be" is also the verb most commonly used to form the predicate adjective, another very common and useful construction. Examples are:

- The leaves *are* green.
- The tree *is* dead.
- The soil *was* too wet to cultivate.

The predicate adjective construction causes trouble when the adjective has been derived from a verb. Excess words are required, and the force of the verb is reduced because it has been converted to an adjective. Examples are:

- Poor:** Trifluralin *is inhibitory* to root growth.
- Better:** Trifluralin *inhibits* root growth.
  
- Poor:** Paraquat *is injurious* to leaves.
- Better:** Paraquat *injures* leaves.

Sometimes a predicate adjective has not been converted directly from a verb, but can still be replaced by a descriptive verb.

- Poor:** Sethoxydim *was lethal* to barnyardgrass.
- Better:** Sethoxydim *killed* barnyardgrass.

The verb "to be" is found in another potentially troublesome construction, the passive voice. Instead of the direct wording of the active voice (The herbicide controlled the weeds.), the order is reversed in the passive voice

## Helpful Hints for Technical Writing

(The weeds *were* controlled by the herbicide.). Both forms present the same information, but the passive voice requires more words. In general, the passive voice, with the verb “to be,” is appropriate when the performer is not mentioned. When the performer is mentioned, the sentence usually is better in the active voice. Following are examples:

**Proper** (performer not stated): Representative plants *were* collected.

**Poor** (performer stated): Representative plants *were* collected by the students.

**Improved:** The students collected representative plants.

**Proper** (performer not stated): The house *was* destroyed.

**Poor** (performer stated): The house *was* destroyed by a tornado.

**Improved:** A tornado destroyed the house.

**Proper** (performer not stated): The weeds *were* all killed.

**Poor** (performer stated): The weeds *were* all killed by glyphosate.

**Improved:** Glyphosate killed all the weeds.

Most verbs can form nouns that name the performer of the action of the verb. Thus, “to think” becomes “thinker,” “to perform” becomes “performer,” etc. Such nouns are useful, but they can add words and detract from the force of the sentence if used where the verb would be better. The verb “to be” is used to form the less desirable construction. Examples are:

**Poor:** Sethoxydim *is a* crabgrass killer.

**Better:** Sethoxydim *kills* crabgrass.

**Poor:** Surfactants *are* penetration enhancers.

**Better:** Surfactants *enhance* penetration.

Whenever you use a form of the verb “to be” (such as *is, am, was, were, has been, shall be*), be sure to consider whether the use represents one of the troublesome constructions that should be changed.

Remember:

The verb “to be” is often used

In ways that are correct;

For uses causing trouble, should

The manuscript be checked.

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