

# *Proofreading Skills Tutorial*

## **Tutorial 13:**

### **Sentence Focus**

**Using Active Voice**

**Using Concrete Nouns as Subjects**

**Eliminating Unnecessary *There* + *To Be* Structures**

This Tutorial includes two files:

- **Lesson (13a\_Sentence\_Focus\_Lesson)**

In order to learn the material presented in this tutorial more effectively, as you read you should take notes in a place that you can reference later. If it is convenient, you could print the tutorial and annotate it so you can keep it for future reference.

- **Exercises (13b\_Sentence\_Focus\_Exercises)** – located in the same area as the lesson)

- It has highlighted areas for you to answer the exercises using an application such as Adobe Acrobat Reader.
- Download and save this file as your own; you will share it with an instructor after you complete the lesson and exercises.

Please contact the Writing Center with any questions or difficulties:

[csmtwc@smccd.edu](mailto:csmtwc@smccd.edu) or 650-574-6436.

## Sentence Focus: The Cornerstone of Good Writing

Strong sentence focus means using vivid, active verbs and choosing concrete nouns to serve as the grammatical subjects of sentences. If your sentences are focused, your writing will be clear, direct, and concise.

This tutorial will demonstrate three strategies for ensuring strong sentence focus:

1. using active voice,
2. using concrete nouns as subjects,
3. eliminating unnecessary *there* + *to be* structures.

### Using Active Voice

Active sentences tend to follow the word order *who does what*, as shown in the following example:

<i>subject</i>	<i>verb</i>	
Jamie	throws the ball.	
who	does	what

In the active sentence, the grammatical subject, “Jamie,” is the agent of the verb. This means that the subject *does* the verb; that is, Jamie *does* the throwing.

Here’s another example:

<i>subject</i>	<i>verb</i>	
The students	conducted	the chemistry experiment.
who	did	what

In this active sentence, the grammatical subject, “students,” is the agent of the verb. This means that the subject *did* the verb; that is, the students *did* the conducting.

In contrast, passive sentences tend to follow this pattern:

<i>subject</i>	<i>verb</i>	
The ball	is thrown	by Jamie.
what	is done	by whom

<i>subject</i>	<i>verb</i>	
The chemistry experiment	was practiced	by the students.
what	was done	by whom

Notice that in both sentences, the grammatical subjects (“the ball” and “the experiment”) are not the agents of the verbs. That is, the subjects don’t *do* the verb. The ball doesn’t *do* the throwing and the experiment didn’t *do* the conducting. Readers usually prefer active sentences over passive ones because active sentences are clearer and more concise and direct.

*Of course, sometimes we need to use passive sentences, especially when we don’t know the answer to the “who” part of “who does what.”*

*For example,*

(X) stole my car.

who did what

We can put the word *someone* in place of X,

Someone stole my car.

who did what

or we can use the passive pattern:

My car was stolen.  
what was done by whom

When we don’t know the agent of the verb, the passive pattern is a good choice. But most often, a passive sentence simply demonstrates weak sentence focus. Consider these examples:

Weak focus: The exam was taken by the students.  
what was done by whom

Stronger: The students took the exam.  
who did what

Weak focus: The material was reviewed by the class to prepare for the exam.  
what was done by whom

Stronger: The class reviewed the material to prepare for the exam.  
who did what

Principle I. Whenever possible, use active sentences rather than passive ones. That is follow the word order *who does what*.

**Please open your 13b exercises file and complete Exercise 1.**

## Using Concrete Nouns as Subjects

Strong sentence focus means not only using vivid, active verbs but also choosing concrete nouns to serve as the grammatical subjects of sentences. A concrete subject (for example, book, baseball, person, Mom) is something you could touch, whereas an abstract subject (for example, faith, anger, kindness) is an idea. Abstract subjects tend to force the use of the **to be** verb (*am, are, is, was, were, been*) and can make writing very difficult to understand.

Let's consider some examples of abstract subjects. Identify the verbs and underline the subjects of each of the following three examples.

Lana's hope is to earn an "A" in her history class.

His appearance was snappy and elegant.

The suffering of laboratory animals is needless.

**What do you notice about the verbs?**

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**What do you notice about the subjects?**

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You probably realized that the verbs are all **to be** verbs. Did you notice the strong, active verbs buried as nouns in the subjects? Many times in the abstract subject we find what really should be the verb of the sentence. In the first example, the subject "Lana's hope" contains the strong, vivid verb *hope*.

We can rewrite this sentence as follows:

Lana *hopes* to earn an "A" in her history class.

The same is true of the second and third examples, which can be rewritten as follows:

He *appeared* snappy and elegant.

Laboratory animals *suffer* needlessly.

Notice that changing the abstract subjects ("Lana's hope," "his appearance," and "the suffering") to concrete ones ("Lana," "he," and "animals") forced us to use active verbs: *hope* instead of *is*; *appeared* instead of *was*, and *suffer* instead of *is*. The strong sentence focus makes the sentences more concise, direct, and easy to understand.

**Principle II.** Use concrete or specific nouns as the subjects of sentences rather than abstract, general nouns. Make the logical *topic* of the sentence the *grammatical subject* of the sentence.

By using **Principle II**, we create sentences that give our reader a strong mental image of what we are trying to communicate.

**Please open your 13b exercises file and complete Exercise 2.**

### Eliminating Unnecessary *there + to be* Structures

Here are examples of appropriate uses of *there + to be*, which simply show that something exists.

There are 25 students in the class.

There is one duck on the pond.

There were three meetings today.

Now consider the following example:

There *is* a need for some students to study harder for the next exam.

In this sentence, the purpose of the sentence is *not* to show the existence of the students. It is to show that some students must study harder for the exam. In this sentence, *there + to be* are empty words that don't give the reader a concrete picture of what the writer is trying to communicate. If we rewrite the sentence to improve the sentence focus, the writing becomes more concise, and direct and easier to understand.

Some students *need* to study harder for the next exam.

Here is another example of how to improve the focus of a sentence using *there + to be* incorrectly:

Weak focus: There *are* many studies indicating that cramming for tests does not work.

Stronger: Many studies *indicate* that cramming for tests does not work.

**Principle III:** Avoid over-using the *there + to be* construction. Use *there + to be* only when you want to say that something exists.

**Please open your 13b exercises file and complete Exercises 3, 4 and 5.**

### **Final Activity**

**Instructions:**

1. Review a classroom essay that you are working on and be prepared to incorporate good sentence focus in your own writing.
2. Make an appointment for a conference with an instructor working in the Writing Center. To make this appointment, sign up using the same method you use to make essay conference appointments. Be sure to include a comment or note that you are meeting about a tutorial.
3. During this appointment, the instructor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your answers to the exercises, and check to see if you can incorporate the skill into your writing.