

Be Verbs and Passive Voice

When writing, our flow can often feel stilted or repetitive. In fact, flow is the number one issue students cite when they get support at the Writing Center at Illinois Wesleyan! To avoid this sort of negative effect on our creative process, we can work with writers to help polish their verb choices.

These choices often stem unintentionally from one of two things:

1. We either write nearly exclusively in passive voice to avoid first person (I, me, my, we, us, our).
2. We use too many “be” verbs.

To address when and when not to use these styles of writing, keep reading!

What are “be” verbs?

Be verbs are verbs conjugated from the infinitive “to be.” They include:

Am	Are	Be	Being	Been	Can
Could	Did	Do	Does	Had	Has
Have	Is	May	Might	Must	Shall
Should	Was	Were	Will	Would	

What is passive voice?

Passive voice engages in the use of be verbs by hiding who is doing the action. For example, instead of writing:

I drew the patient’s blood for a cholesterol lab...

The person doing the action will write:

The patient’s blood was drawn for a cholesterol lab.

Passive voice can be useful for avoiding the first person in writing, which is often a requirement of more research-oriented assignments. Passive voice is also necessary for minimizing gender bias in writing (instead of writing “she did the work,” you can write “the work was done,” for example).

So when should we use be verbs and passive voice and when should they be avoided?

- Be verbs are therefore necessary when you have an assignment which requires passive voice. Many APA-style assignments fall into this category to avoid [gender bias](#) in one's writing.
- Be verbs are also useful when you want to show an action is ongoing: “she is running the campaign” for example, lets us know the work is continuing as compared to “she runs the campaign,” which may make the action seem more stagnant.
- On the other hand, be verbs can sometimes add to your word/ character count. If you're on a tight word limit, cutting unnecessary be verbs gives you a more to-the-point, or concise, flow:
 - “They are working together” has one more word and seven more characters (26 versus 19) than “They work together.”
- Be verbs can also make your writing sound repetitive. For example, if you continually write in your analysis “This fact is important,” readers are going to feel like even though you may be articulating new points, they're redundant instead. Try shaking up your use of be verbs with a variety of other active verbs instead of the passive “be” including:

Strong Active Verbs:

Analyze	Argue	Articulate	Bolster	Caution
Clarify	Deny	Go	Grasp	Guide
Highlight	Hinder	Illuminate	Impart	Infer
Instruct	Join	Magnify	Make	Modify
Move	Notify	Pinpoint	Probe	Realize
Relate	Refine	State	Steer	Strike
Transform	Treat	Untangle	Unveil	Voice

Now, you can write instead: This fact articulates the importance of the authors' views.

To sum up: Be verbs are necessary from time to time, but as you edit and grow in your writing ability, challenge yourself to limit your use of them in writing.

