

In composing, as a general rule, run your pen through every other word you have written; you have no idea what vigor it will give your style.

--Sydney Smith

- Who has been guilty of writing as if we are getting paid a dime a word? For many of us, this habit may have started in high school. John R. Trimble in *Writing With Style* calls this “phrase-stretching—a hard habit to break” (53).
- Who else has been guilty of having this glorious idea and then trying to get it down on the page only to end up with something not so glorious? You read your sentence and think: what the heck? And your English instructor (and audience) is probably confused too.
- Well, read the following guidelines and try the exercises and see if this helps you get sharper and tighter sentences, ones that better reflect your bright ideas.

EXAMPLE: Wanting to unfurl his fingers on the frets of the guitar was a struggle for Jonathan.

Who or what are we talking about here? What is the subject? _____ What should be the subject? _____

(**Jonathan struggled** to unfurl his fingers from the frets of the guitar. A more concrete subject and vigorous verb)

What are the most important choices writers make about a sentence? **THE SUBJECT AND THE VERB**

SENTENCE FOCUS GUIDELINES

Generally Speaking, good writers:

Σ MAKE USE OF CONCRETE SUBJECTS WHENEVER POSSIBLE.

Weak: The reason we need to maintain well-funded public school systems is because present and future generations need them to ensure boundless opportunities.

Better: Present and future generations need well-funded public schools to ensure boundless opportunities.

Σ MAKE THE DOER OF THE ACTION THE SUBJECT OF THE SENTENCE.

Weak: What the author Andrew Lam writes about is how his identity is affected by his childhood in Vietnam.

Better: The author, Andrew Lam, writes about how his childhood in Vietnam affects his identity.

∑ **AVOID USING "IT" AND "THERE" AS SUBJECTS WHENEVER POSSIBLE.**

Weak: In some cultures, there are differences arising over what is bad and what is not, but the chief usually decides.

Better: In some cultures, members disagree over what is good or bad, but the chief usually decides.

∑ **AVOID PASSIVE VERBS.**

Weak: The essay was written by the student.

Better: The student wrote the essay.

∑ **AVOID USING FORMS OF THE VERB "TO BE."**

Weak: His need for wild weekends was lost after he turned twenty five.

Better: He lost his need for wild weekends after he turned twenty five.

SENTENCE FOCUS, EXERCISE #1:

Directions: Underline the subject and verb in each of the following sentences. Using the principles of good sentence focus, revise the sentences to make them more clear.

EXAMPLES:

A. Weak: My reason for missing the appointment was because I couldn't find the doctor's office.

Better: I missed the appointment because I couldn't find the doctor's office.

B. Weak: There were two actions, which could have been taken by us.

Better: We could have taken two actions.

(Having good sentence focus does NOT mean you will have only short simple sentences. You can still use all the sentence structures we have gone over— appositives, verbals, adjective clauses, and the joining words— but you will make sure your subjects are concrete and your verbs are vigorous.)

1. The appeal of the advertisement was to children.
2. There is a Brazilian dancer living in the dorms.
3. Something we all need is love.
4. It was expected of me by my boss that I learn two foreign languages.
5. When Einstein was only 26, the theory that would make him famous was developed by him.
6. The reason I'm a vegetarian is because I am allergic to meat.
7. His stance in relation to nuclear disarmament is favorable.
8. Her interest in sports was developed at an early age.
9. There have been times when there was no incentive for me to work hard.
10. The result he hoped to achieve was frightening the girls when he waved a skull outside

their window.

11. The reason for the confusion of most people with the new regulations is the ambiguous way they were written.
12. Evaluation of research subjects was done by two different teams of highly-trained social psychologists.

SENTENCE FOCUS EXERCISE #2

The following sentences are poorly focused, using either weak subjects or verbs, or both. Rewrite these sentences using more concrete subjects and/or more active verbs.

1. Something every person needs is a high degree of self-confidence.
2. It is obvious that there should be more courses in the humanities taken by the average student.
3. In the process of planning his major, the result he hoped to achieve after graduating was getting a good job with a good salary.
4. The reason for the confusion of most people about the new tax-reform proposals is that they are written in legalese, language only lawyers understand.
5. It was when I was waiting in line at the DMV that the realization came to me of how complex dealing with a major bureaucracy is.
6. Her long-winded and unclear sentences have been replaced by succinct, sparkling prose.
7. It is said that power is corrupting (58).
8. In an ideal society, creating a sense of belonging would be looked upon highly by its citizens.
9. What Cristina Garcia's main character, Suki Palacios from *The Lady Matador's Hotel*, is trying to prove is that women, young women even, can exert exacting control and power over formidable opposition.