

Avoiding Weak Verbs

Weak verbs are telling action words used so often in speaking and writing that they have become meaningless and boring.

Another issue with weak verbs is that they describe nothing to the reader, which makes the narrative vague and wordy. Besides being meaningless and dull, weak verbs can lead to passive voice.

Yes, it is impossible to write without using an occasional *are, is, had, feel, or was*. However, creative writing aims to replace weak verbs with stronger, more robust, active verbs or phrases. Strong verbs will make the story more captivating and to the point.

Avoid “to be” and “to have” verbs. But there are other weak verbs to watch for.

Note:

This does not mean you cannot use these weak verbs. The goal is to mix it up and use stronger verbs. Do not make the reader read the same weak verb 200 times in your novel. Mix it up using stronger verbs.

A few common weak verbs:

are	look	see
come	loud	sit
feel	make	stand
get	move	turn
go	placed	walk
had	put	was
is	said	went

Issue: (made, go)

Sasha entered the living room and grinned. “Sam, don’t tell me mama made you go to church?”

- ▶ The weak verbs “made” and “go” words made this sentence wordy and vague.

Fix:

Sasha entered the living room and grinned. “Sam, don’t tell me mama dragged you to church?”

- ▶ Replacing “*made*” with “dragged” and deleting “*go*” gave the reader a better picture and made the sentence more engaging.

Issue: (moved)

Joe *moved* his toolbox from the car to the garage.

- ▶ The verb “*moved*” is vague and shows the reader little.

Fix:

Joe hauled his toolbox from the car to the garage.

- ▶ See the difference? Using words like hauled, dragged, lugged, or carted provides better imagery for the reader.

Issue: (walked)

Sue *walked* down the isolated beach.

- ▶ The weak verb “*walked*” is so overused that it means nothing.

Fix:

Sue strolled down the isolated beach.

► Yes, walked and strolled means the same thing, but the word strolled is a stronger verb and paints a better picture for the reader.

Other word choices: wandered, roamed, marched, moseyed, drifted, etc.

Issue: (went)

Sue *went* to the hospital as soon as she ended the call.

► The word “*went*” does not show the reader anything.

Fix:

Sue rushed to the hospital as soon as she ended the call.

► Using strong verbs like “rushed, hustled, dashed, bolted” provides better imagery for the reader.

Issue: (looked)

Joe *looked* at Sue and smiled.

► *Looked* is another overused weak verb that means nothing.

Fix:

Joe turned to Sue and smiled.

Or even better.

Joe shifted his gaze to Sue and smiled.

Related:

The words “**look, see, turn**” are three of the most overused weak verbs I have seen while critiquing new writers.

Replacing them with stronger verbs is better. But, depending on the context, you will be better off not using them. Removing the words **look**, **see**, or **turn** will make your story more direct and engaging.

Look

Picture this:

Sue and her boyfriend Joe are eating at a restaurant and they are deep in conversation.

Issue: (Looking)

“Do you like my idea?” Joe lifted his wineglass.

Looking at her boyfriend, she nodded.

► The reader knows Sue and Joe are speaking. There is no need to tell the reader Sue is looking at her boyfriend.

Fix:

“Do you like my idea?” Joe lifted his wineglass.

She nodded.

Issue: (looked)

He looked at her and poured wine into her glass.

► When a couple is together, the reader knows they look at each other. There is no need to say it.

Fix:

He poured wine into her glass.

See

The word “see” is the next most used weak verb. Recheck your writing and see if you can remove the word.

Picture this:

Joe enters his apartment and discovers he has been burglarized.

Issue: (saw)

Joe stepped through the door and saw his belongings and furniture scattered all over.

► The word “saw” is a word form of “see”. It is a sensing filter word.

Fix:

Joe stepped through the door and stopped. His belongings and furniture were scattered all over.

► The action is implied. The reader knows if Joe opens the door, he sees stuff.

Turn

Readers are smart and they know people turn toward each other when conversing. Well, most of the time.

In short, there’s no need to tell the reader the character turns this way and that way.

Picture this:

Sue and Joe leave the restaurant and are in the parking lot. They are walking together but heading separate ways.

Issue: (turned)

Sue *turned* to her boyfriend and blew him a kiss.

Fix:

She lifted her hand and blew her boyfriend a kiss.

► The reader knows she had to have turned to blow her boyfriend a kiss. There's no need to tell it.

Issue: (turned)

Joe smiled, *turned*, and headed for his car.

Fix:

Joe smiled and headed for his car.

In Summary:

Trust the reader to complete the picture. Replacing weak verbs with stronger verbs makes for better reader engagement.

You do not have to tell the reader the character's every movement. Most of the time, it is implied.