

TECHNICAL WRITING STYLE

Improve your technical communication skills by using the following:

- E-Prime
- The Active Voice
- The Paramedic Method

E-PRIME

E' = E - e

E = the whole English language, e = all *to be* forms

am	I'm not
are	aren't
is	isn't
was	wasn't
were	weren't

be (will be, must be could be, and so on)
been (would have been, must have been, and so on)

E-PRIME

The Value

E' makes you pay attention to every word that ends up in your final draft:

A tungsten screw is in the sole of the club to lower the club's center of gravity.



A tungsten screw in the sole of the club lowers the center of gravity.

E-PRIME

The Value

E' automatically varies your verb choice

There were many pirates who coveted the Aztec gold. They were looters and hoarders of the ancient treasure.



Many pirates coveted the Aztec gold. They looted and hoarded the ancient treasure.

E-PRIME

The Value

It gets rid of expletives (*it is, there is, there are*)

It is necessary to check the oil regularly.



Check the oil regularly.

E-PRIME

The Value

It puts your writing into active voice.

The orcs were mown down by Gimli.



Gimli mowed down the orcs.

THE PASSIVE VOICE

It was midday. The bus was being got into by passengers. They were being squashed together. A hat was being worn on the head of a young gentleman A long neck was one of the characteristics of the young gentleman. The yards of luggage to him was being grumbled at by the title because of the jostling which was being inflicted on him by him. As soon as a vacant seat was espied by the young gentleman it was made the object of his precipitate movements and it became sat down upon (72).

Yikes!

–Raymond Queneau, *Exercises in Style* (1981)

PASSIVE VOICE FORMULA

to be + past participle + (optional by-phrase)

to be forms: am, are, is, was, were, be, been . . .

Past participles: walked, kicked, eaten, understood, sung . . .

The copy machine was stolen (by Fred).

MORE ON PASSIVES

Avoid the passive voice because

- It takes more time to read (and more words = more cost)
- It causes problems with translation (John was fired by Fred.)
- It sounds too impersonal (The eggs need to be collected. The report was written.) (no responsibility, no credit)

EXCEPTIONS

Use passive voice if

You want to avoid assigning blame:



Mistakes were made.

**Coffee was spilt on the xerox machine.
(the boss did it)**

EXCEPTIONS

Use a *be*-form if

You are using present progressive tense



The rockets are flying.

It is raining.

EXCEPTIONS

Use passive voice if

You want to move a long subject to the end of the sentence.

The rhizome, a modified underground stem used for storing water and nutrients, produces the leaves.



The leaves are produced by the rhizome, a modified underground stem used for storing water and nutrients.

EXCEPTIONS

Use passive voice if

Your discipline requires it.



Twenty milliliters were added to the solution.

PRACTICE REMOVING *TO BE*

1. **Circle** every occurrence of *to be* (use the **find** function in your word processing program).
2. **Look** for the real action.
3. **Choose** a strategy to revise the sentence:
 - Check for replacement words (avoid *exist, become, get*)
 - Add an agent if appropriate
 - Combine with another sentence
 - Rewrite the whole sentence

Delete Unnecessary Words

There are many students who love homework.

Find *bes*: **There are many students who love homework.**

Find the real action: **There are many students who love homework.**

Delete unnecessary words:

Many students who love homework.

Check for Replacement Words

Mike Myers will be the substitute dean while Harry Hellenbrand is on vacation.

Find *bes*: **Mike Myers will be the substitute dean for tomorrow.**

Find replacement words:

Mike Myers will act as the substitute dean for tomorrow.

Add an Agent

The president was not informed.

Find *bes*: The president was not informed.

Find the real action: The president was not informed.

Add an agent:

The CIA did not inform the president.

Combine with Another Sentence

Cameron Diaz is a blonde comedienne. She has starred in both *Charlie's Angels* movies.

Find *bes*: Cameron Diaz is a blonde comedienne. She has starred in both *Charlie's Angels* movies.

Combine with another sentence:

Cameron Diaz, a blonde comedienne, has starred in both *Charlie's Angels* movies.

Rewrite the Whole Sentence

The menu for Thanksgiving dinner is turkey-and-gravy soda.

Find *bes*: The menu for Thanksgiving dinner
is turkey-and-gravy soda.

Find the real action: buy? mix? serve? gag?

Rewrite the whole sentence:

We will serve turkey-and-gravy soda for Thanksgiving.

Or: Only the insane will serve turkey-and-gravy soda
for Thanksgiving.

TECHNICAL WRITING STYLE

- Saves time
- Saves headaches
- Saves \$