EVALUATE YOUR VERBS

To write a dynamic, specific, and accessible abstract, start by inspecting your verbs.

First, highlight every verb you use, and identify which subject it goes with. This handout provides you with tools to assess each verb by asking four key questions: 1. Is this verb precise enough? 2. Will a reader understand this subject-verb pairing? 3. How many times have I used "is" or "are" as my main verb? 4. How many verbs does each sentence contain?

I. VERB PRECISION

It is easiest to be precise at the end of a project, when your draft has fulfilled all the promises your proposal made: to investigate, analyze, examine, etc. Vague verbs are often left over from your initial intuitions, when you had a plan for your work but had not yet articulated your conclusions or discovered your findings. Aim to make your abstract as precise as possible by reporting your process and your findings with specific, concrete verbs.

GENERIC VERBS

- investigate
- examine
- challenge
- critique
- intervene
- explore
- focus on
- analyze

MORE PRECISE VERBS

- I test the hypothesis *A* and find *B*.
- I object to theory *C*'s premise *D*.
- This article defines a new concept *F*.
- I argue that text *G* does specific thing *H*.
- I collect and present examples from *J* to show *K*.
- I propose a new principle *L*.
- I identify and name assumption *M* in theory *N*.
- I introduce interpretation *P* to field *Q*.

You can also experiment with dropping the first-person framing, "I did x." Sometimes this framing is crucial to emphasize your original contribution. But you may want to try simply stating your claim: for example, "Premise *P* fails to account for example *E*. "

II. SUBJECT-VERB PAIRINGS

Can an atom **waltz**? Can a novel **spill**? Can a risotto **flop**?

When the subjects of our sentences are concrete nouns, it is simple to evaluate whether a subject-verb pairing works. It's relatively easy to spot and appreciate metaphor and figurative language. We assess pairings in light of their contexts, say, in a children's book versus an instruction manual.

Academic work talks a lot about ideas: abstract nouns like "social movement," "research literature," "ethical framework," "historical period," "theoretical modeling," or "institutional change." It is more difficult to determine what these abstract ideas can do or be. We might be stumped by questions about how they can act on other abstract ideas. Can they emerge? affect? contain? suggest? justify? expedite?

Some subject-verb pairings sound okay but, on closer inspection, are quite vague. For example (taken from published works):

- Can a bundle of factors yield individual preferences?
  - Instead, try: Factors X and Y influence people's preferences.
- Can a social movement forge structures?
  - Instead, try: The pressure from activists led to the formation of committee D and policy N.
- What is it to "clarify a process"?
  - Instead, try: I identify six stages that are part of the process of Z.

With each of your subject/verb pairings, ask yourself if you have a solid grip on what it means for that subject to do that verb. Then ask if you can reasonably expect your reader to have a precise understanding of that combination.

Could my reader and I easily give other examples of this subject-verb pairing, for instance, other "movements forging structures"?

III. "TO BE" VERBS

A vast number of long academic sentences hinge on the verb "is" or "are." Sometimes using the "to be" verbs are unavoidable: categorizing, labeling, describing, and connecting are all key parts of our scholarship. But often "is" conceals other actions. Any time you can replace it with better, precise verbs, do it!

For example :

- The comestible sensations that precede both the achieved reminiscence and its inherent condition of emotional repose **ARE** a sensorimotor dramatization of the fact that a "feeling of tendency" is being conveyed to his memory by his taste buds.

The sensations **PRECEDE** the memory. Taste buds **CONVEY** a feeling. The sensations **DRAMATIZE** a physical process of remembering. All these verbs are more powerful, and accessible, than the original "are."

(You can see this complete sentence makeover on the [Writing is Thinking blog](.).)

IV. NUMBER OF VERBS PER SENTENCE

The core of your sentence is its main subject-verb pairing. But in complex sentences, other verbs are lurking. In the example above, "are" is hiding more dynamic verbs, like "precede" and "convey." Each verb could be the foundation of its own sentence. So if you put them all in one sentence, you need to have a good reason for this choice. Be sure the main pairing is the one you want to emphasize--the one that expresses your key point.

To find more resources for writing an accessible abstract, visit the Writing is Thinking blog at writingisthinking.com/blog/