



Action! (Verbs)

This lesson will help you choose strong verbs so the action of your writing comes alive for the reader.

Verbs seem easy. Any writer can come up with a verb. However, a thoughtful writer crosses out a lot of verbs before the right one comes along—and often the writer feels there’s still a better verb, a perfect verb, out there somewhere.

A good verb helps your reader see and feel the action.

It’s easy to write “**She walked home.**” But how many ways are there to walk? “She walked home” does not give your reader a clear look at *how* she walked home. Watch what happens when you use a different verb: **She strolled, stumbled, staggered, wandered, rushed, hiked, marched, strutted.** Each of those verbs shows a different way to walk. Each verb plants a different picture and a different feeling in the reader’s mind.

In his book *Travels with Charley*, John Steinbeck writes of his trip across the U.S. in a truck named Rocinante. His dog Charley came along. In the Badlands of South Dakota, they meet a rough-looking hunter. Steinbeck writes:

I pulled up to speak to him, saw his eyes wash over Rocinante, sweep up the details, and then retire into their sockets.

A weaker writer would have had the hunter’s eyes “look over Rocinante, notice the details, and then go back into their sockets.” With the verbs **wash over, sweep up** and **retire**, Steinbeck shows us the hunter’s scorn for him and his truck—and probably for his dog too.

To choose a strong verb, you need to see and feel the action yourself (at least in your mind).

In my *Jackpine Point Adventure #1, The Re-Appearing Statue*, I needed some good verbs for a complex chain of events. Here’s the set-up: The five friends hold a meeting in the attic of Dillon’s home. The floor of the attic has three trap doors with ladders down into three different rooms. David Malloy, holding a Little League trophy behind his back, backs up and falls through one of the holes. Here’s the final sentence from the book:

One foot went down into space, the other foot followed, one hand grabbed for the edge of the hole, the other hand still clutched the trophy, and I dangled from one elbow which was hooked onto the attic floor while my feet fumbled for the ladder.

My first ten or eleven tries at that sentence were a mess. I did not understand exactly what happens when you step backward through a trap door with one hand full, and I didn’t want to try it personally. With my husband’s help, I acted it out (minus a real hole in the floor) until I got the right actions in the right order.

Start-Up:

The following sentences have weak verbs in *italics*. On scratch paper, **rewrite each sentence using a stronger verb**. Try several verbs until you find one that does the job well. **Act out** the sentences if it helps you. (Yes, you can act like a hurricane as long as you don't break anything.) You may need to add other words to a verb to complete your idea. For example, for sentence #2, instead of "touched" you could write "slammed into."

1. Peter "Lightpaw" Peterson, master spy, *walked* toward enemy headquarters.
2. The hurricane *touched* the fishing boats.
3. My rescuers *threw* me a life preserver, and I *caught* it.
4. When my name was *spoken* for the top award, I *went* to the platform.
5. After a week in the desert, I *drank* a lot of water at an oasis.

Intermediate:

Each of the following sentences desperately needs a few good verbs. **Rewrite each sentence on scratch paper, using the best verbs you can find**. When you have filled in verbs for each sentence, go back and try to find **even better verbs** for the blanks.

1. As the heavy rain began, I _____ into my tent and _____ there through the long cold night.
2. I called the police and _____ them to _____ immediately because a strange person was _____ around my house.
3. When the singer _____ the high note, I _____ my ears because I didn't want my eardrums to _____.
4. We _____ through the old trunk until we _____ the letters, _____ them out and _____ them so we could _____ our ancestor's Civil War record.
5. I _____ through my schoolwork so I could _____ out into the warm sunshine and _____ the rest of the day.

Advanced:

Here is an excerpt from my *Jackpine Point Adventure #3, Something's Fishy*. Verbs are in *italics*. The narrator, David Malloy, is about to go on a canoe trip. David's mood is generally optimistic. **Rewrite the excerpt** by substituting verbs which **change the narrator's mood to fear and dread of the trip**. You may want to keep some verbs as they are. You can change other details to increase the sense of apprehension; for example, you might want to alter those calm blue waters and light green trees.

We *tumbled* out of the cars to *stand* on a paved parking lot where a boat ramp *sloped* down to calm blue waters *ringed* by spruce and pine and aspen trees, which *were wearing* their early light spring green. The lake *looked* small, but the adults *said we were only seeing* one end of it. It was supposed to *lengthen* to the right around a bend in the shore. We *would paddle* that way to our first campsite at the far end of this lake. The days *are getting* long up here this time of year so we *would have* plenty of daylight *to make* it.