**How can I identify weak verbs?**

Like all parts of speech, verbs are strongest when they are precise and concrete. For verbs, "concrete" is the quality of expressing real movement in the real world--or in fiction, the world we accept as real. In other words, strong verbs tell us exactly what is done and that is a real action.

Verbs have a natural hierarchy, from strongest to weakest:

* Doing (strongest)
* Saying
* Thinking or feeling
* Being done to
* Being (weakest)

This example should illustrate the hierarchy of verbs in reverse order (from weakest to strongest):

* Jim was sick.
* Jim was being made sick by the clam dip.
* Jim felt sick.
* "I feel sick," Jim said.
* Jim vomited on the Persian rug.

The strongest verbs express actions in the real world. The weaker verbs express less real-world action. At the bottom are the being verbs which express either no action or very little.

**As an exercise, revise a couple of pages (about 500 words) of your writing so that verbs which are not already doing or saying verbs are raised at least one level in the hierarchy wherever this is possible.**

Doing verbs include: shot, walked, detonated, grinned, strangled, sang, and so forth. Obviously, some of them are more exciting than others. Strengthening your verbs is not a matter of putting more "stabbed," "wrecked," and "smashed" into your work (unless you are an action writer, in which case you can hardly have too much), but it is a matter of learning to express what does happen in your story with strong, active verbs.

The saying verbs are "said" and "asked." "Said" and "asked" are perfectly good for most dialogue, and you do not improve upon them by making them "shouted," "whispered," "inquired," and so forth just for the sake of variation. You strengthen speeches by promoting many of them to actions.

Some actions are done in speech: lying, plotting, proposing, inviting, and so forth. Speeches which do things that are done in speech are fine as they are. But speeches that merely stand back and comment on the real action are weak. You should show us the action rather than letting the characters talk it out.

For example, when John tells Mary he loves her, that is declaring himself to her, and it is a perfectly good action. Of course, Mary would be well advised to examine John's actions to see whether his declaration is likely to be true or not. But when John says to Bill, "You know, I really love Mary," that may or may not be an effective use of the saying verb. If Bill is John's rival and John is challenging Bill, the speech might be effective. But if Bill is John's friend and the real reason for the speech is merely to let the reader know how John feels, the speech is much less effective than having John do things that indicate he loves Mary.

Thinking and feeling are much like saying, but a little weaker because they don't happen in the real world, but happen only in a character's head. Like saying verbs, feeling and thinking are best when they expression the action rather than reflecting or commenting upon it. "Suspected" is often a good thinking or feeling verb. Suspecting is an action that occurs in the mind. "Recalled" and "reflected upon" may not be so good because they are often employed merely to convey some bit of the "story so far" to the reader and have little to do with what is happening in the story's "now."

Being-done-to verbs are verbs in the passive voice. They still express a bit of action, albeit in a backhanded and wordy way. In addition, the passive voice tends to create a fatalistic and pointless tone. The world is always doing things to characters: what does it matter what they do, they are always the victims of forces beyond their control. This might be your world-view and it might be what you want to express in your story, but if you write in the passive voice, readers will never discover what your world-view is because they will find something more interesting to do than to read your story. In other words, if people take advantage of kind-hearted Mary, that is fine, but avoid having Mary being taken advantage of.

Being verbs are the weakest. Avoiding being verbs is the object of the advice, "Show us, don't tell us." In some cases, you can show John doing loving things instead of telling us he is in love with Mary. Instead of telling us Mary's hair is red, you can probably stick the adjective "red" in front of "hair" at some convenient time when her hair is mentioned.

So far I have discussed aspects of verbs having to do with concreteness--the reality of the action they express. You can identify the weaker verbs by their forms: "was" and "were" in the case of being verbs, and the "was (or were) being somethinged by someone" in the case of being-done-to verbs. You can examine sentences involving saying, thinking, and feeling to see whether they really expression the action of the story or whether they are mostly commentary.

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