The Writer’s Diet
Verbs power our sentences as surely as muscles propel our bodies. In fact, a sentence is not technically a sentence unless it contains a verb. Not all verbs pack the same punch, however. Active verbs such as *grow*, *fling* and *exhale* infuse your writing with vigor and metaphorical zing; they put legs on your prose. Forms of the verbs *to be* – for example *is*, *was*, *are* – do their duty too, but they carry you nowhere new. Think of them as the gluteus maximus of your grammatical anatomy.

It is much easier to write a sentence that is dominated by *be*-verbs and passive constructions – such as the one you are reading right
now—not to summon the energy to construct action-driven prose. After all, why waste time ferreting through your brain in search of varied, vivid verbs if that good old standby is will serve your sentences just as well?

Active verbs merit effort and attention for at least three reasons. First, they supply a sense of agency and urgency to your writing by telling you who did what to whom. A scientist’s passive locution, “The research was performed,” lacks the honesty and directness of “We performed the research.”

Second, active verbs add force and complexity to otherwise static sentences. When you write, “The pandemic swept through South America,” you implicitly liken the pandemic’s effect to that of a fire sweeping through a forest or a broom sweeping clear a cluttered floor. “The pandemic was very serious” simply doesn’t spark our imagination in the same way.

Third, active verbs demand economy and precision, whereas be-verbs invite sloppy syntax. Consider this flaccid sentence by a philosophy student:

What is interesting about viruses is that their genetic stock is very meager.

A light workout— including the addition of a stronger verb and a fresh adverb—renders the sentence at once stronger and livelier:

Viruses originate from a surprisingly meager genetic stock.

In sum, be-verbs function much like equal signs in a mathematical equation; rather than shifting a sentence into new territory, they describe the status quo. In a passive verb construction, a be-verb neutralizes an active verb like a spider trapping a honeybee: “He was startled
by the bell”; “Her face was lined with wrinkles.” Note how, in these sentences, the action words lose their status as verbs and take on the role of descriptive adjectives (startled, lined) instead.

When used in moderation, there’s nothing wrong with be-verbs. We need is in our sentences just as we need starch in our diet and socks in our wardrobe. Forms of be can help us create subtle distinctions of agency, action and tense; for example, “I was made to feel inferior” means something quite different from “She made me feel inferior” or “I felt inferior.” Likewise, “He is going shopping” suggests a different temporality than “He goes shopping” or “He shops every day.”

Be-verbs become problematic only when we grow lazy: when is and are become the main staples of every sentence simply because we cannot be bothered to vary our verbs. The following excerpt from an undergraduate essay on cinematography offers a case in point:

American Beauty is one of the best films I have ever seen. The Academy gave the movie a “Picture of the Year” award, among other honors. There are many good uses of cinematography throughout the film. I will be describing how cinematography is used to enhance what is happening in that particular scene.

Be-verbs (is, are, be) make up nearly 10% of the words in this passage. Two potentially active verbs, describe and happen, suffer from the weakening addition of -ing, which necessitates an accompanying form of be (“will be describing,” “what is happening”). Meanwhile, the only remaining active verbs – see, give, use, enhance – prove so bland and generic that they contribute little more energy than is and are. When we strip away the be-verbs from the final sentence – “I will be describing how cinematography is used to enhance what is happening in that particular scene” – we reveal the core sentence that lurks beneath:
I will describe how cinematography enhances what happens in a particular scene.

This new version retains the meaning of the original, but the word count drops from 17 words to just 12 – a “lard factor” (to borrow a phrase from Richard A. Lanham) of 29%.1

Accomplished authors do not ban be-verbs altogether. Instead, they employ them carefully and in moderation, with occasional bursts of strategic excess. For example, the opening sentence of Charles Dickens’ A Tale of Two Cities contains the be-verb was a whopping ten times:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair . . .

Yet if you look at the pages that follow this be-verb bonanza, you will find that they shimmer with active verbs. Having lulled us into a sense of stasis and sameness with all those abstract was-phrases, Dickens suddenly veers off into a colorful, verb-driven description of pre-Revolutionary France:

France, less favored on the whole as to matters spiritual than her sister of the shield and trident, rolled with exceeding smoothness down hill, making paper money and spending it. Under the guidance of her Christian pastors, she entertained herself, besides, with such humane achievements as sentencing a youth to have his hands cut off, his tongue torn out with pincers, and his body burned alive, because he had not kneeled down in the rain to do honour to a dirty procession of monks which passed within his view, at a distance of some fifty or sixty yards.
VERBAL VERVE

Rather than telling us directly that the political situation in France was grim, Dickens shows us a misguided nation that "rolled with exceeding smoothness down hill," like a severed head into a basket. Personifying France as a frivolous woman who "entertained herself" by staging events such as the youth's gruesome death - "his hands cut off, his tongue torn out with pincers, and his body burned alive, because he had not kneeled down in the rain" - Dickens draws an unspoken parallel to Marie Antoinette, the queen whose luxurious excesses would eventually inspire France's oppressed underclasses to revolt. In both cases, he relies not on overt comparisons - "France was like this or that" - but on active verbs that perform a much more subtle yet dramatic metaphorical function.

The most famous speech in Shakespeare's Hamlet, likewise, kicks off with three be-verbs in a row:

To be, or not to be: that is the question.3

Faced with the stark choice between life or death, the tormented Prince Hamlet asks himself:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them?

The active verbs that animate this sentence - suffer, take arms, oppose - charge the prince's existential musings with a vivid physicality sustained through the rest of the soliloquy:

Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveler returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?

In Hamlet's grim vision of human existence, we must choose between two equally unsavory choices: to "grunt and sweat" and "bear those ills we have," or to leave our physical selves behind and fly to the "undiscover'd country" of death, from which "no traveler returns." Through his use of active verbs, Shakespeare portrays life (to be) as a painful burden and death (not to be) as a frightening journey.

Active verbs fire our imagination by appealing directly to the human senses; they invite us to see, hear, touch, taste and smell objects and ideas, rather than merely letting them be. Craft-conscious writers do not necessarily reach for a thesaurus every time they compose a new sentence. However, they do routinely exercise and stretch their vocabulary, seeking out verbs that convey visual imagery and action.

Observe, for example, the elegance and exactness of the verbs selected by Pulitzer-Prize-winning author John McPhee to describe how shad (a kind of fish) strike at a fisherman's lure:

Flutter something colorful in their faces and shad will either ignore it completely or snap at it like pit bulls. More precisely, they'll swing their heads, as swordfish do, to bat an irritant aside. They don't swallow, since they're not eating. Essentially never does a hook reach the gills, or even much inside the mouth. You hook them in the mouth's outer rim — in the premaxillary and maxillary bones and sometimes in the ethmoid region at the tip of the snout, all of which are segments of the large open scoop that plows through plankton at sea.