



(U) Did He 'Go' Into the Courthouse, or 'Sneak' Into It?

FROM: [REDACTED]
the SIDtoday editor
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(U) Many people's idea of "good writing" involves the use of colorful adjectives ("an unctuous, inscrutable snake-oil salesman") or comparisons ("as subtle as a sledgehammer"). While those techniques can certainly liven up a text, I would argue that the real key to writing well is a lot more basic: choosing **VERBS** wisely.

(U) Here's a rule: action verbs outclass passive verbs or verbs of being (i.e. "is," "are," "was," "were," etc.). How so? A text filled with the latter carries no feeling of forward momentum; it just lies inert, like a Galapagos tortoise. Compare the following two paragraphs:

- **Example 1:**

(U) The objective **is** a redesign of the workforce-training program. The development phase's deadline **is** the spring of 2007. The directors of this program **are** Mr Flotsam and Ms Jetsam. They **have received** instructions on the desired end-state and it **is expected** that no misunderstandings **will exist** between them and upper management.

- **Example 2:**

(U) The training directors, Mr Flotsam and Ms Jetsam, are **embarking** on a revamp of the workforce-training program. Having already **sounded out** upper management as to how the company envisions the new program operating, the two are certain they can **launch** a suitable program by the spring of 2007.

(U) While the first example comes across as just a static series of facts, the second reads more like a "story," with one action following another. Readers not only find this easier to read, they also comprehend it better, since they don't have to do all the work themselves of figuring out cause and effect.

(U) Furthermore (and luckily for us), the English language brims over with action verbs that convey subtleties of meaning. You could say that a man "went" into the courthouse, but you could also say that he:

"wandered" in,
"strutted" in,
"marched" in,
"sneaked" in,
"slinking" in,
"scurried" in,
"hurried" in,
"dashed" in,
"ambled" in,
"plodded" in,
"paraded" in,
"sashayed" in,
"shuffled" in,



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"stumbled" in,
"swaggered" in,
...the list goes on. So, instead of using an all-purpose word like "go," select one that best fits the situation and draws a more detailed picture. You are still using only one word, but you are getting much more mileage out of it.

(U) You might want to try an experiment the next time you write something. Write your text in your usual way, and after you are done, go back over it again, looking just at the verbs. Are they static? If so, replace them with livelier verbs that will propel the narrative forward. Are they rather generic? See if you can think of more descriptive verbs to use instead. Now read it again. I think you'll see a difference.

(U) Here at SIDtoday, we often ask readers to tell us what type of articles they'd like to see (that they aren't already seeing). The #1 response is, "I'd like some tips on how to improve my general writing skills!" True, there's a popular SIDtoday series called "Write Right," but that is geared towards SIGINT reporting. So, the above is an attempt to answer the mail. If you find this useful, let me know and I'll try to post some more articles in future. - the editor.

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