

Lesson 4.4

Harness the Power of Verbs

Nothing is more important to strong word choice than powerful verbs. Verbs are the engine of writing. They put mental pictures into motion. Of course, as you likely suspect, you cannot insert any old verb into any old slot. There's a big difference between climbing the stairs and bounding up the stairs, or between shrugging and sulking, smiling and grimacing, reading a book and ripping through it. In this lesson, we invite you to come up with some verbal nuances of your own—using your thesaurus to help you.

Sharing an Example: *Gulliver's Travels*

In the following passage from the novel *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift, Lemuel Gulliver has just washed ashore after a terrible storm. Upon waking, he finds tiny strings tying him firmly to the ground. As you read the passage, look and listen for verbs that help you picture the scene—or just contribute to the energy of the passage. Underline each one you find.

I felt something alive moving on my left leg, which advancing gently forward over my chest, came almost up to my chin. When bending my eyes downward, I perceived it to be a human creature not six inches high, with a bow and arrow in his hands and a quiver at his back. In the meantime, I felt at least forty more of

the same kind following the first. I roared so loud that they all ran back in a fright, and some of them were hurt with the falls they got leaping from *my* sides upon the ground.

At length, struggling to get loose, I had the fortune to break the strings and wrench out the pegs that fastened *my* left arm to the ground.

Gulliver's Travels
by Jonathan Swift

Share and Compare

Meet with a partner or in a writing circle to share the verbs you underlined. Did you mark the very same words? Did you mark *every single verb*—or did some stand out as especially important? Are there any you would replace with other options?

The One-Liner Warm-Up

Time to reach for that thesaurus again. (You're becoming an expert in using it!) In the following sentences, we've put some verbs in **bold print**. That doesn't mean they're bold verbs, however; in fact, most are downright wimpy. Use your imagination *and* thesaurus to replace each wimpy verb with one that creates a vivid movie in the reader's mind. Work with a partner or in a writing circle.

1. We **moved away** as the wild dog **ran** toward us.
2. As the groom slipped and **went** into the cake, a huge laugh **came** from the bride.
3. The enormous eagle **saw** the mouse before we did, and within two seconds, **came** down and **took** it.

4. The silent snake **moved** through the grass, **coming** alarmingly close to the campers' bare feet.
5. The thief **walked** away with his prize, **looking back** over his shoulder.

Share and Compare

Share your revisions in a writing circle—or with the whole class. Talk about why you chose some of the verbs you did. What kind of picture does each one create? Do verbs also affect mood?

Paving the Way for Verbs

While verbs are important in all writing, they're vital in any writing involving action—such as the earlier passage from *Gulliver's Travels*. For this practice, we want you to choose a writing topic in which action plays an important role. You do NOT have to write about sports in order to include action. Even weeding the garden can be very active—and perhaps you're even into “extreme weeding.” (Who isn't?) Choose your own topic or use our list to help you think of an idea:

★ My own topic: _____

OR . . .

- Any sports moment (game or practice) you recall well
- Any chore involving physical motion
- A wild ride of any kind
- Violent weather
- Dancing
- Cooking

To see if your topic is a good one, close your eyes for just one minute and picture the “movie” playing in your mind. Can you think of three or four verbs to describe what's happening? If so, you've made an outstanding choice.

Roughing It

Take five minutes to prewrite. List details, make a sketch, or make a word web featuring power verbs that go with your topic.

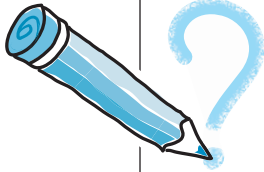
When you finish, take ten minutes (or more) to write a rough draft. Be SURE you double space, allowing room for revision later. Write quickly—and pack in the action.

Revising with Verbs in Mind

Read your rough draft through carefully. Underline any verbs you find. Are they all just right? If some could be stronger, use your thesaurus to find a good synonym (or synonym for a synonym). If you can't decide, write down some possibilities and ask a partner or your writing circle team to help with your choice.

Share and Compare

Share your revised draft with partners or in writing circles—and ask for help if you need it. As each writer shares, listen for verbs. Which ones stand out? Write your favorite on an index card, fold it, and hand it to the writer after he or she shares. Do NOT read the cards until everyone has shared.



A Writer's Questions

Let's say a sports columnist decides to use verbs and nouns as the foundation of all writing—and to leave out most modifiers (adjectives and adverbs). Do you think this barebones writing would be effective? Or would something be missing? Can you find a sports column (or any writing example) to back up your opinion?



Putting It to the Test: Class Discussion

Is it possible to insert strong verbs into *any* writing—on *any* topic? For example, suppose you are writing about whether television is a good or bad influence on viewers. Could you make strong verbs part of your response? Let's say you found a way to do that—and the writer next to you *only* used verbs like *is, are, was, were, have, has, be,* and *been*. Would that really make a big difference to the person reading the essays? Why?