



Day One: Keepin' it STRONG

## 1) What's a STRONG verb?

There are some verbs we like to use over and over. There's nothing really wrong with them, only they're a bit boring. We talk, walk, run, ALL THE TIME in our manuscripts. You don't really want your writing to be the same as someone else's. Mix it up.

### Consider this:

TALK: address, babble, banter, blah, blab, bunk, chat, **chatter**, chitchat, communicate, confer, debate, dialect, gabble, **gossip**, jargon, lecture, interview, **mumble**, orate, patter, rant, rap, wow, report, rumour, sermon, speak, speech, spiel, tattle, tongue, utter, **verbalise**, voice, yap

Look how many different verbs could be used instead of 'talk'! And each of these verbs has a slightly different, more specific meaning that could describe your characters actions perfectly.

It's so easy to lapse into using adverbs in your writing, for example:

- I listened to him *intently*.
- She walked *quickly* through the shopping aisles.
- He spoke *slowly* to the man.
- *Suddenly*, he was at the door.

What's an adverb? It's a part of speech that describes the verb. There are different types of adverbs but the guilty offender here is the one that ends in -ly.

Adverbs aren't always a bad thing, but they can slow your writing down unintentionally.

Look at the difference when we use strong verbs on those same sentences:

- I **hung** onto his every word.
- She **sliced** through the shopping aisles.
- His words **strolled** as he spoke.
- He **burst** through the door.

### Your turn.

Rewrite this paragraph using STRONG verbs.

*She waited impatiently for him to return. Time moved so slowly. Even the hands on her watch moved slowly. He'd talked to their priest. She got up and moved around the room. Her heart beat quickly. The dog barked loudly outside. Was it him? She walked quickly to the window, and carefully pulled the curtain back.*

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How many of you switched out 'got up'? 'Got' is a chief offender in the lazy verb category. Try replace it.

### How to find your adverbs

Use the 'find' and 'replace' function to look up '-ly'. You can work through from there.

## 2) Repeat offenders

When you're writing, there's a tendency to reuse the same words over and over. For example, these are my favourites, 'turned' (lots of people turning in my books), 'leaned', and 'smiled'. You'll get to know your repeat offenders over time. How to handle them? I write up alternative strong verbs on a card and keep them on the wall where I write. That way, when I come to that word, I can look up and replace it with an alternative.

Turned: spin, swivel, twist  
Leaned: bend, tend, incline  
Smiled: beam, grin, laugh

### What are your repeat offender verbs?

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A great resource for looking up different verbs is the Flip Dictionary by BA Kipfer, F&W Publications.

### What are some alternative STRONG verbs for your repeat offender verbs?

## 3) What about eliminating your WEAK verbs?

It's not exhaustive, but search for any of these and see if you can replace them with a strong verb:

- **Versions of 'TO BE', 'TO HAVE'**

- Is, Am, Are, Was, Were
- Have, Has, Had

These auxiliary verbs (versions of 'to be' and 'to have') weigh down your writing, and tend to lean towards 'telling the story'. Ideally, keep your writing to simple past or simple present, for example:

I was driving vs *I drove*  
They are learning vs *They learn*  
We have waited vs *We waited*

Your turn. Rewrite this paragraph applying what you've learnt about STRONG verbs so far...no auxiliaries, and no weak verbs:

*I was walking to the shops when he was stopped by the flat tyre. I was mad that he'd left the spare in his garage. Who leaves their spare in the garage? He was about to get out the car, when they were approaching. They'd been looking for someone to help them with their broken skateboard.*

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- **Bye 'by' to passive tense**

Did you notice the passive tense in that paragraph? *He was stopped by the flat tyre.*

Basic English sentence structure is Subject Verb Object (SVO), for example:

Jack kicked the ball.

Passive tense switches the subject and object of a sentence, The keyword to look for here is 'by', for example:

The ball was kicked **by** Jack.

**Your turn.** Rewrite this paragraph applying what you've learnt about STRONG verbs so far...no auxiliaries, no passive tense, and no weak verbs:

*The cat was startled by the kitten. It had got under her favourite blanket, and was hiding. The kitten was purring madly, and was being petted by her human who knew she was there.*

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- **The stale love affair with -ing**

A popular sentence structure relies heavily on the present participle -ing, for example:

He was running when the gun shot rang out.  
The cake looked delicious, icing running down the edges.  
The facts of the case were misleading them.

The addition of -ing drags down sentences. The same sentences without the present participle:

He ran. The gun shot rang out.  
The cake looked delicious. Icing ran down the edges.  
The facts of the case misled them.

There are other ways to vary your sentence length and convey action – don't be scared to use shorter sentences.

**Your turn.** Rewrite this paragraph applying what you've learnt about STRONG verbs so far...no auxiliaries, no passive tense, no present participles and no weak verbs:

*Jamie was standing on the corner, whistling a familiar tune. He had got up early to wait for her, thinking about how much he missed her. The day had been long. His hair had been fixed by his roommate. Suddenly, she was there.*

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## To recap:

- Avoid *-ly* adverbs
- Use STRONG verbs
- 'Got' is not a STRONG verb
- Identify your repeat offender verbs and find alternatives
  - Say bye 'by' to passive tense
- 'Helping' auxiliary verbs are not your friend
- Kick '-ing' present participles to the kerb

