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Vital Verbs

By Joseph E. Wright

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Vital Verbs

Remember back in the dark days of your school years when you had to learn the parts of speech? A noun is the name of a person, place, or thing. When asked what a verb was, you smugly answered, A verb is a word that indicates action, or some such definition. Fine. You got that straight. Since then, you've uttered or written verbs in the hundreds of thousands.

Verbs are great words. They enable us to describe actions or states of being or feelings we'd be hard pressed to convey without them. "John outside the house. John inside the house. John in bed."

Primitive, to say the least. With the help of verbs, we can say, "John came home and went directly to bed." Still, if verbs are indispensable in our speech and in our writing, why do we neglect them so?

Yes, we neglect them terribly. There are countless verbs just sitting in our dictionaries that are rarely taken out and used, seldom get to feel themselves flowing out of our mouths or proudly sitting on the paper on which we write. You have to feel sorry for them.

Why are they neglected? You can blame it on the nouns and adjectives. They're the real culprits. We can't express a worthwhile thought without a noun. Without a noun (or pronoun), how do we indicate the very subject we are talking/writing about? In the example above, without nouns, you'd have, "outside the," "inside the," and "in ." It wouldn't make any sense.

Adjectives we can sometimes live without, but for the most part we have been brainwashed since those same school days to use adjectives. As writers, we use them extensively, carefully choosing,

Vital Verbs

then eliminating, then choosing again, until we feel we have the perfect adjectives to describe our protagonist, our settings, our emotions. I suspect much of your time as a writer is devoted to being so very particular in the adjectives you use. That's great. That's important.

To get back to the poor, neglected verbs. Oh, we use them all right. We use the few hundred (if that many) in our vocabulary. We use what we need, we use the ones we're comfortable with, we use the same old, tired, hackneyed verbs day in and day out. What are those verbs? They're the dead verbs. The ones which may tell others that something happened, but never tell anything more than that, never give the reader an image of a special kind of action.

Let's go back to the example above. I used two verbs, "came" and "went." All those two verbs tell you is that John was no longer outside his house, and is now in his bed. What if I had said, "John flew though the front door and dashed upstairs to his bed."? You get a picture: for whatever reason, John was in a hurry. How about this: "John staggered through the front door and crawled up the stairs to his

bed." Do you get the impression John is intoxicated or sick or injured?

Let's try a few other simple examples. "Mary entered the room" vs. "Mary glided into the room" or "Mary stumbled into the room" or "Mary inched her way into the room." Each of these paints a picture of more than mere transference of locale.

It's cruel for your heroes and villains to be limited to listless verbs. These characters are the very essence of your action. They should barge into, seldom just come into; they may sometimes snarl, snap, snicker, smirk, or shout, instead of just say; they're also able to punch, plunder, pillage, plow under, or pelt, but seldom merely touch. Even your minor characters should be as colorful in their actions. Just because they are not the stars of your masterpiece doesn't mean they don't play important and exciting parts. Charles Dickens knew that probably better than any other writer. His most minor characters are sometimes as unforgettable as his major players.

A suggestion: On the following list of dead verbs, notice the alternatives:

action: walk

alternatives: stroll, amble, jog, dash, sprint, stagger,

action: lie (down)

alternatives: sprawl, lounge, curl up, stretch out

action: say

alternatives: mumble, stutter, spew, shout, protest

action: look

alternatives: scan, squint, glare, study

You get the idea.

Now, try this. Go to something you've written recently. Scan through and pick out a number of dead verbs. You know the kind, the ones which just sit there and don't tell you much of anything about the action. Try replacing them with verbs which tell the reader precisely what just happened. Reread, and you'll see how your writing comes out of its coma, and begins to take on a new, interesting life.

Vital Verbs

Finally, keep in mind that in writing as in all of life, moderation and common sense should prevail. Don't have your work look like a thesaurus, using every verb ever conceived. This is especially true in sentences where you use other descriptive words. Don't let your heroine always float into a room, squeal with delight, or wither others with her sarcasm. The villains should not always bluster, rampage, or bulldoze. Remember, there are plenty of times when it's preferable for your characters to merely say, just come or go, or quietly nod, but use enough real action verbs to add color to your writing, and use them when appropriate. Those poor, listless verbs do, after all, serve a purpose, and that purpose is to vitalize your other verbs.

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Joseph E. Wright is the author of Tales from the Wrecktory (

), The Bodies

Out Back (A Murder Mystery) and The Remigrants (Those who come back from the dead), both published by

. His writing has appeared in Ellery Queen Mystery

Magazine.

Joseph E. Wright was born and went to school in New England and later moved to Philadelphia. He considers Philly his home town.

Joe grew up addicted to the British cozies of Christie and Sayres and the American counterparts of Queen and Stout. He was a fan of the film noir of Hammett and Chandler.

His first published novel, Memorandum of a Murder (Manor Books) confirmed his determination to become a writer. A short story of his appeared in Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine.

While writing, Joe had to make a living, which he did in many ways. One period of his life, he lived in a dark, rambling, nineteenth century rectory in downtown Philadelphia. It inspired his Tales from the Wrecktory (MetropolisInk) which appeared last year.

Somewhat different from the whodunit style of novel, Joe's The Remigrants, the story of those who return from the dead, is currently in the editorial stage.

The Bodies Out Back is the first in a completed trilogy starring Pat Montgomery and Phillis Toner. The next two, The Maris Cove Murders and Aisle of the Dead should be published this coming year.

Joe and his life partner spend most of the year in sunny Florida.

In Praise of Personal Pronouns

By Robert F. Abbott

Rudolph Flesch, a pioneering advocate of readability, put great stock in the liveliness of the written word.

One way of getting that liveliness into our writing, he said, is to use the personal pronouns: you, me, I, we, us, he, she, him, her, and they.

When we use personal pronouns, several important things happen. For starters, we personalize our writing, and that makes it easier for readers to relate to the subject.

For example, which of the following two sentences would be more effective? (1) The use of personal pronouns personalizes written communication. (2) When we use personal pronouns, we personalize our writing.

I think you would agree that sentence 2, with several personal pronouns, is more lively and more likely to be understood. That sentence allows readers and listeners to relate to the words; in other words, there's a personal connection. On the other hand, the first sentence is a collection of abstract concepts.

In using personal pronouns, we also make our writing more like our spoken communication. Listen to almost any conversation and you'll notice frequent use of 'I', 'you', and 'we'. It's quite natural to speak that way.

One more point: When we use personal pronouns, we're more likely to use active verbs and less likely to use passive verbs. By passive, I mean the 'to be' verbs, including 'is,' 'are,' and 'be.' When we replace these verbs with verbs that do something, we increase readability.

Try personal pronouns yourself. Take a document that you want others to read and rewrite it to include more of them. In the process of doing that, you're bound to make it more readable. What's more, you'll also make your words more effective.

Robert F. Abbott writes and publishes Abbott's Communication Letter. If you subscribe, you will receive, at no charge, communication tips that help you lead or manage more effectively. [Click here for more information:](#)

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