

Lesson Four: Verb Tense

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Lesson One:

Tackling the Question

Lesson Two:

Brainstorming a Topic

Lesson Three:

Structure and Outline

Lesson Four:

Style and Tone

Select One:

- ✦ [Sentence Variety](#)
- ✦ [Word Choice](#)
- ✦ [Verb Tense](#)
- ✦ [Transitions](#)
- ✦ [Essay Clichés](#)

Lesson Five:

Intros and Conclusions

Lesson Six:

Editing and Revising



As you write your essay, remember to focus on verbs and keep adjectives to a minimum. Pumping your sentences full of adjectives and adverbs is not the same thing as adding depth or color. Adjectives and adverbs add lazy description, but verbs add action.

Passive Tense

Our editors find that one of the greatest weaknesses of admissions essays is their frequent use of the passive tense. For this mini-lesson you will learn why the passive voice should be avoided, how to identify it, and how to replace it with the preferred active voice.

Overuse of the passive voice throughout an essay can make your prose seem flat and uninteresting. Sentences in active voice are also more concise than those in passive voice. You can recognize passive-voice expressions because the verb phrase will always include a form of *to be*, such as *am*, *is*, *was*, *were*, *are*, or *been*. The presence of a *be*-verb, however, does not necessarily mean that the sentence is in passive voice. In sentences written in passive voice, the subject receives the action expressed in the verb; the subject is acted upon. In sentences written in active voice, the subject performs the action expressed in the verb; the subject acts.

EXAMPLES:

(Passive) *I was selected to be the tuba player by the band leader.*

(Active) *The bandleader selected me to be the tuba player.*

(Passive) *I will be prepared for college as a result of the lessons my mother taught me.*

(Active) *My mother taught me lessons that will prepare me for college.*

(Passive) *I am reminded of her voice every time I hear that song.*

(Active) *That song reminds me of her voice.*

EXERCISE #4: STRONG VERBS vs. WEAK VERBS

Fill in the blanks using the most descriptive or active verb phrase.

1. After working closely with my mentor, I _____ advanced techniques in oil painting.

- a) was beginning to master
- b) began to master
- c) mastered

2. My newspaper article on the labor strikes _____ both praise and criticism.

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- a) generated
- b) got
- c) was the recipient of

3. Once I joined the debate team, I _____ the opportunity to compete every weekend.

- a) sought
- b) had
- c) was exposed to

4. Samuel's touchdown _____ the stadium crowd.

- a) created much energy in
- b) energized
- c) really energized

5. Woolf's essay _____ my opinion of gender inequality.

- a) challenged
- b) made me take another look at
- c) was challenging to

6. As Jessica drew near me, I _____ the baton and took off running.

- a) grasped
- b) got
- c) was given

7. Once my mother had fallen asleep, I _____ the dolls on her nightstand.

- a) put
- b) arranged
- c) set up

8. Chris and I _____ an educational project for first-graders in our community.

- a) began
- b) started
- c) initiated


9. "Why didn't you ask me before throwing it away?" Jason _____.

- a) hollered
- b) said angrily
- c) started to yell

10. Mr. Franklin _____ that he was our true father.

- a) let us know
- b) told us

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c) revealed

Answers:

1) c; 2) a; 3) a; 4) b; 5) a; 6) a; 7) b; 8) c; 9) a; 10) c;

Changing Passive Voice to Active Voice

If you want to change a passive-voice sentence to active voice, find the agent in the phrase the person or thing that is performing the action expressed in the verb. Make that agent the subject of the sentence, and change the verb accordingly. For many instances of the passive voice in your essay, you can follow these steps:

1. Do a global search for the words "was" and then "were." These words often indicate the passive voice.
2. Cross out the "was" or the "were."
3. Add -ed to the verb that follows "was" or "were."
4. If that changed verb does not make grammatical sense, it is an irregular verb, so change it to the simple past tense.
5. Rewrite the sentence around the new active-voice verb.

EXERCISE #5: MAKING SENTENCES MORE ACTIVE

Change these sentences from passive voice to active voice, or note if no change should be made.

1. I was taught by my brother the principles of barbecuing.

2. My father was given the title by the former head chief.

3. The house was wrecked by the party and the cat was let loose by the guests.

4. The house is a mess, the cat is lost, and the car has been stolen by Justin.

5. Unfortunately, my plan was ruined by Gerald, the building superintendent.

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6. The roof was leaking. It had been leaking all week.

7. The ball was thrown by Lucy, who had been hiding in the bushes.

8. Francesca was placed on the first flight to Boston. Her father put her there.

9. "To be or not to be?" That is the question.

10. A feast had been created from nothing. I was astounded.

Answers:

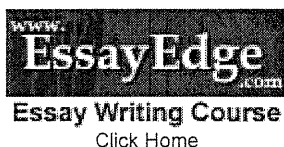
1. My brother taught me the principles of barbecuing.
 2. The former head chief gave the title to my father.
 3. The party wrecked the house and the guests let the cat loose.
 4. The house is a mess, the cat is lost, and Justin has stolen the car.
 5. Unfortunately, Gerald, the building superintendent, ruined my plan.
 6. No change.
 7. Lucy, who had been hiding in the bushes, threw the ball.
 8. Francesca's father placed her on the first flight to Boston.
 9. No change.
 10. A feast had been created from nothing. This astounded me.
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EXERCISE #6: PASSIVE-FREE WRITING

Write a 100-word essay on anything at all (preferably relating to your essay topic) without using any form of the verb "to be."

Continue to Transitions

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Lesson Four: Transitions

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Applicants often ignore transitions to their own detriment. A good essay must use transitions within paragraphs and especially between paragraphs to preserve the logical flow of the essay. An essay without good transitions is like a series of isolated islands; the reader will struggle to get from one point to the next. Use transitions as bridges between your ideas. As you move from one paragraph to the next, you should not have to explain your story in addition to telling it. If the transitions between paragraphs require explanation, your essay is either too large in scope or the flow is not logical. A good transition statement will straddle the line between the two paragraphs.

You should not have to think too much about how to construct transition sentences. If the concepts in your outline follow and build on one another naturally, transitions will write themselves. To make sure that you are not forcing your transitions, try to refrain from using words such as, "however," "nevertheless," and "furthermore." If you are having trouble transitioning between paragraphs or are trying to force a transition onto a paragraph that has already been written, then this may indicate a problem with your overall structure. If you suspect this to be the case, go back to your original outline and make sure that you have assigned only one point to each paragraph, and that each point naturally follows the preceding one and leads to a logical conclusion. The transition into the final paragraph is especially critical. If it is not clear how you arrived at this final idea, you have either shoe-horned a conclusion into the outline, or your outline lacks focus.

If you are confident in your structure, but find yourself stuck on what might make a good transition, try repeating key words from the previous paragraph and progressing the idea. If that doesn't work, try this list of common transitions as your last resort:

If you are adding additional facts or information:

as well, and, additionally, furthermore, also, too, in addition, another, besides, moreover

If you are trying to indicate the order of a sequence of events:

first of all, meanwhile, followed by, then, next, before, after, last, finally, one month later, one year later, etc.

If you are trying to list things in order of importance:

first, second etc., next, last, finally, more importantly, more significantly, above all, primarily

If you are trying to connect one idea to a fact or illustration:

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for example, for instance, to illustrate, this can be seen

To indicate an effect or result:

as a result, thus, consequently, eventually, therefore,

To indicate that one idea is the opposite of another:

nonetheless, however, yet, but, though, on the other hand, although, even though, in contrast, unlike, differing from, on the contrary, instead, whereas, nevertheless, despite, regardless of

When comparing one thing to another:

In a different sense, similarly, likewise, similar to, like, just as, conversely.

EXERCISE #7: TRANSITIONS

Connect the following sentences using an effective transition, when needed. (In some cases, the two sentences will be able to stand without a transition.)

1. Ordinarily, I took my responsibility seriously and would write down classmates' names to preserve the silence and decorum of the school environment.

When a different teacher walked in, a teacher known to punish too hard and painfully, I decided to save my friends from his hard strokes, and I erased all the names.

2. Despite the windy conditions and below freezing temperatures, I could not tear myself away from the awe-inspiring beauty of the cosmos.

Despite the frustration and difficulties inherent in scientific study, I cannot retreat from my goal of universal understanding.

3. But the sadness with which she responded, stating, "He died when he was a baby," convinced me that it was true.

It affected me as nothing ever would again.

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4. Finishing the test in an unspectacular six minutes and five seconds, I stumbled off the erg more exhausted than I had ever been. That night, I went home and caught a cold.

Had I followed my survivalist and rationalist instincts, I would have quit rowing then and there;

5. Immediately, I realized that I must dedicate my life to understanding the causes of the universe's beauty.

The hike taught me several valuable lessons that will allow me to increase my understanding through scientific research.

6. After my grandfather's death, I began to understand and follow his sage advice.

I pulled out a picture of my grandfather and me at Disneyland.

7. Often, she had to work from dusk to dawn living a double life as a student and a financially responsible adult.

My mother managed to keep a positive disposition.

8. In addition to working and studying, she found time to make weekly visits to terminally ill and abandoned children in the local hospital.

My mother developed the value of selflessness.

9. My mother made me learn Indonesian, the official language of our country.

Also, she wanted me to develop interests in various academic and extracurricular

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