

Burly Verbs

Technique #3 is an inner style called a **Burly Verb** or **BV** for short. The word **Burly** means brawny, muscular, strong, and powerful. Strong and powerful verbs are the kinds of verbs we want to use. They drive a story and keep your reader engaged.



A verb is a word that shows **action** - like run, jump, sing, type, write, think, get, dance, and so on. Just like adjectives, not all verbs are exciting. Not all are brawny, muscular, strong, and powerful. Some are weak, wimpy, puny, pathetic, frail.



Weak verbs are on your **Banned words list**: go, went, get, live, put, said, tell, run, etc. Review your banned words list and refer to the Alternative Verbs page and Thesaurus whenever you are drafting your stories and essays.

When it comes to strong verbs in your sentences, using Burly Verbs is only half the issue. The other half concerns passive verbs like was, is, are, were, has, had, and so on. There is a full list of passives on your banned words list. Even though passives can be effective when used properly, most often they are overused, and if they are overused, the work is not very compelling and usually used for bedtime stories. Active verbs are much more inviting and captivating than passive constructions, and they keep your reader awake!

The problem with passive writing is that unless new writers purposely address this issue, most just THINK in passive terms. Writing Foundations works at tearing down passive habits so that vibrant, active terminology can begin to take its place.

Here is an example from “A Funny Story” of thinking passively.

Once upon a time, in far away Ireland, there dwelled a good man, his wife, his two very small girls, and his ginormous yet nice dog, and they were really so very happy.

This sentence is passively constructed. **There dwelled** is passive, making the WHOLE sentence passive because there dwelled is the central verb of the sentence. No one is actively doing anything – they are dwelling, living, just being – that’s all.

In order to fully change it from passive to active, a writer has to reconstruct it from the ground up.

For example, a writer can ask, “The man and the wife did what?” and from there, come up with:

*Over two hundred years ago, in a wooded part of Ireland, a hardworking man and his devoted wife joyfully **raised** two young daughters.*

(The dog part is extra info that would be better off in another sentence.)

The number one question to ask yourself when wrestling with a passive is:

Who did what?

If you are trying to convey an action, you want to avoid passives and use strong verbs that SHOW what the subject did.

The boy was very happy to eat at Cold Stone Ice Cream.

This sentence is not going to give a reader much mental stimulation.

*The five-year old **bounced** with delight as the Cold Stone Ice Cream clerk **handed** him a bowl of chocolate ice cream covered with sprinkles.*

However, this sentence actually SHOWS how happy the boy was and even explains why. The writer used a combination of burly verbs (bounced, handed) with adjectives and really specific nouns like clerk, delight, and sprinkles.



Even with a banned adjective, a simple change such as – *The happy boy **rejoiced** to eat at Cold Stone Ice Cream* – is more effective than the passive at planting a picture in the reader's mind which is what strong writers are aiming for.

When you write your stories and essays, avoid passive constructions by thinking, “Who did what?” Strengthen your work with **burly, active verbs** when you write.

Handouts that go along with this Handout:

Stylistic Techniques Page (TP)
Banned Words List (BWL)
Alternatives to Banned VERBS (ABV)

