

DISCOVERING E-PRIME

by

ELAINE C. JOHNSON

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Like many of my colleagues, I entered the English classroom woefully unprepared to teach students how to write clearly. I didn't know what to say to them when I read over their thin, voiceless prose. Nevertheless, I forged ahead, assigning writing, reading it with attention, responding always to what struck me as honest, authentic. Over time, I observed that the best student writers used language vividly, as all fine writers do, and gave strength to their writing, in part, by using a variety of verbs.

One day I read a paper I found particularly flat and dull. I reread the first paragraph, and noticed that all the verbs came from the verb "to be." I drew little boxes around every form of that verb I came to in that student's paper and wrote in the margin, "Vary your verb choices." When I sat down with the student to go over the paper to show her how to make the writing more effective, I helped her change the sentences to accommodate other verbs. We eliminated the passive voice. She seemed skeptical, but could see that her writing had improved, just by tinkering with the verbs she had used. Notice the difference:

BEFORE

Dear Miss Havisham:

You and I are two different people and for this reason I don't at all agree with the way you've chosen to live your life. I can only imagine how hard it was for you when the groom didn't show up at your wedding, but that was no reason to lock yourself up. The damages you created could have been less if you hadn't been so selfish. I believe that your involving other people made the situation much worse than it could've been.

AFTER

Dear Miss Havisham:

In many ways we differ from each other and for this reason I don't agree with the way you've chosen to live your life. I can only imagine how horrible you must've felt when the groom didn't show up for your wedding, but why did you need to lock yourself up? The damage you created could have lessened if your selfishness hadn't taken over. I believe that involving other people with your problems made the situation much worse.

[Student, Age 16]

As a teacher, I had experienced a major break-through in learning what to say to students to help them improve: "Vary your verb choices'." Note what another student did in her revision:

BEFORE

Anyway, here we all were sitting around the swimming pool, talking. Of course when one's whole family is sitting around, one does not talk about the gorgeous guy sitting in the blue lounge chair on the other side of the pool or the fact that one is able to see Bart's boxer shorts through his dress whites, particularly in the presence of company Especially when the company was to be one's in-laws So conversation went on to cover dinner plans for tomorrow night, wedding plans for next month, and plans about Bart's next assignment. [This particular subject was dominated by both fathers and lasted for a very long while.] All of these topics were of no interest to me, so I continued watching the cute guy across the pool.

AFTER

Anyway, there we sat around the swimming pool, talking. Of course when one's whole family sits around, one does not talk about the gorgeous guy in the blue lounge chair on the other side of the pool or the fact that one can see Bart's boxer shorts through his dress whites, particularly in the presence of ones future in-laws So conversation went on to cover dinner plans for tomorrow night, wedding plans for next month, and plans about Bart's next assignment. [Both fathers dominated discussion of this particular subject.] I had no interest in any of these topics, so I continued watching the cute guy across the pool.

[Student, Age 17]

Years went by, and I encouraged students to use "vivid verbs," to "show" in their writing, rather than "tell" I never had cause to go further with this until last fall I encountered a student who wouldn't settle for my weak explanations as to why his writing improved when he sought active verbs and eliminated forms of the verb "to be." He wanted to know *why* I made such a fuss over verbs, "to be" in particular; I realized I had no solid theoretical base from which to make my arguments, so turned to a colleague, our resident semanticist Ruth McCubbrey.

"What reason do I give to students for eliminating/minimizing forms of the verb 'to be'?" I asked her.

"Tell them it ties their language closer to experience, that using other verbs forces them to take responsibility for their statements. You know: 'I liked the film' instead of 'The film was great.' I have an article I'll give you," she responded.

Later that day, my colleague handed me a reprint of E.W. Kellogg's "Speaking in E-Prime: An Experimental Method for Integrating General Semantics into Daily Life" [*Et cetera*. Vol. 44, No. 2, Summer 1987]. To say it changed my life wouldn't exaggerate my reaction by much. I read it and reread it, amazed and delighted by what I found in Kellogg's piece. Much of it validated what I had struggled with for years, but hadn't understood, the *why* of E'. Kellogg defines E' as English without forms of the verb "to be." Korzybski concerned himself with the "is of identity" and the "is of predication" only - thus allowing "to be" as a helping verb and as a synonym for existence - but I have adopted Kellogg's definition, finding it a greater challenge! I learned something about why certain people angered me and stopped conversation cold when they spoke in English absolutes ["The play was wonderful."] I realized something very important: when I wanted to express myself very clearly, or make a very important point, I always spoke in E'! I thought back on classroom situations, heated arguments, and saw the pattern repeated over and over. I thought, if he can do it, if he can speak and write consistently in E', so can I.

I had the privilege of working last year with a group of able seniors. I read an enormous amount of their writing, and, after I read Kellogg's article, shared with them some of the insights I had gained from him, insights which supported the comments they had found, some of them over and over again, on their papers. My colleague held my hand during this process, warning me of the arguments students voiced to the best thinking on the subject. They complained that their writing seemed to lack force when they tried to eliminate "to be" verbs. I referred them to Kellogg's points about mirroring their own experience through what they wrote, rather than setting down a series of assertions. Many of them took what I said to heart, and worked hard to rid their writing of forms of the verb "to be." They spoke to each other of E' and seemed to regard it as a toy, a puzzle to solve. They eliminated the passive voice from their writing. I read and graded 23 research papers and found about five uses of the passive in all of them. That must set some sort of a record for research-based writing on the high-school level.

I have not used the term E-Prime with my other classes, but have found ways to explain why I consider careful verb choice so important. My freshmen can compose general statements without using "to be" verbs ["I found the movie more rewarding than the novel"], and my juniors and seniors know that if they rely too heavily on that verb, I will box in every instance, and pressure them, not too gently, to improve their writing by substituting other verbs. I say again and again that eliminating "to be" verbs forces me to vary my sentence patterns, to say what I want to say more responsibly, to speak honestly to myself and others, to see the world as flexible rather than static. Using E-Prime makes me a better writer, and a better person.

Elaine C. Johnson teaches English at Tamalpais High School, Mill Valley, California.