

Student Name _____

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Date Completed _____



SENTENCE FOCUS

In composing, as a general rule, run your pen through every other word you have written; you have no idea what vigor it will give your style.

~Sydney Smith



QUESTION #1: In high school, did you write as if you were getting paid by the word, as if the longer the paper was, the better--even if it had a lot of fluff or rambling gibberish?

ANSWER #1 (Be honest!):

Sydney Smith, above, exaggerates by stating we should cross out every other word, but usually we can trim our sentences, cutting out unnecessary words, which will help your writing in general, when we revise, and also on your personal insight essays for entrance into many four-year colleges.

QUESTION #2: Do you ever get a sentence on the page and read it and think: *that doesn't make sense* or *what am I trying to say here?*

ANSWER #2:

If you answered "YES!" to one or both of these, you aren't alone. This exercise will help you rid your sentences of dead weight AND get a better grasp of how to construct sentences in a more clear manner.

QUESTION #3: What are the most important elements of a sentence, or what makes a sentence?

ANSWER #3 (If you don't know, just guess.):

If you said: **A SUBJECT + VERB + (a direct object)**, you are correct.

Is this a sentence? Kristin swims. >>>YES! It is a short sentence with a subject plus a verb.

This is a sentence with a subject, verb, and a direct object. >>>Kristin swims with her brother.

This writing exercise will assist us in being more mindful with our sentences—what we are selecting as our **subjects** and **verbs** and if there is any **extra words or fluff** we can edit out.

Please read the following sentence and reflect on it.

Wanting to unfurl her fingers from the frets of the guitar was a struggle for her.

This sentence is from a student paper. It isn't so clear, correct?

- a. Who or what is the subject? Who or what is the writer talking about?

It isn't totally apparent.

If we go by what comes before the verb to find the subject, we get:

"Wanting to unfurl her fingers on the frets of the guitar" but this is a wordy and unclear subject.

So, who or what *SHOULD* be the subject? Let's give the subject a name. How about "Lydia"?

- b. If we start the sentence with "Lydia" what comes next?

c. Lydia struggled...

- d. Lydia = a clearer subject
- e. struggled = a more interesting verb
- f. Now, what can we add to complete the sentence and capture the student's full idea from above?
- g. Lydia struggled to unfurl her fingers from the frets of the guitar.**

Is this sentence more clear and thus stronger? Yes or No? (Circle one.)

Verb Test: "to unfurl" also sounds like a verb, but here's a way to figure out verbs in a sentence, those words that change tense and ones that just seem like verbs. Put a "Tomorrow" in front of the sentence and what changes tense?

Tomorrow, Lydia **will struggle** to unfurl her fingers from the frets of the guitar. (Notice that the tense of "to unfurl" doesn't change so it's **not** a verb here. Struggle is the verb since it changed from past tense to present tense.)

Ok, so here are some guidelines to use when composing sentences.

SENTENCE FOCUS GUIDELINES:

1. MAKE USE OF CONCRETE SUBJECTS WHENEVER POSSIBLE:

WEAK: Wanting to unfurl her fingers from the frets of the guitar was a struggle for her.

BETTER: Lydia struggled to unfurl her fingers from the frets of the guitar.

2. MAKE THE DOER OF THE ACTION THE SUBJECT OF THE SENTENCE.

WEAK: What the Bay Area author Andrew Lam writes about is how his identity is affected by his childhood in Vietnam.

BETTER: The Bay Area author, Andrew Lam, writes about how his childhood in Vietnam affects his identity.

3. AVOID USING "IT" and "THERE" AS SUBJECTS WHEN POSSIBLE.

WEAK: In some tribes, there are differences arising over what is bad and what is not, but the chief usually decides.

BETTER: In some tribes, members disagree what is good or bad, but the chief usually decides.

4. AVOID PASSIVE VERBS

WEAK: "Isaac Cameron Hill" was written by Ammi Keller

BETTER: Ammi Keller wrote "Isaac Cameron Hill."

5. AVOID USING FORMS OF THE VERB "TO BE," as usually you can find a fresher verb.

WEAK: The connection between US Prohibition and the Islamic faith prohibiting alcohol was revealed in Quiz Bowl.

BETTER: The contestant in Quiz Bowl revealed the connection between US Prohibition and the Islamic faith prohibiting alcohol.

SENTENCE FOCUS EXERCISE #1:

Directions: Underline the subject plus the verb in each of the sentences. After doing that and using the Sentence Focus Guidelines, rewrite the sentence to make it better, more clear.

EXAMPLE:

WEAK: There were two actions, which could've been taken by the striker.

BETTER: The striker could've taken two actions.

(Having good sentence focus does NOT mean you will have only short, simple sentences. You can still use many sentence structures, like joining words or adjective clauses, but you will make sure your sentences have concrete subjects and vigorous verbs.)

1. **WEAK:** The appeal of the video game, Eden Ring, was to teenagers.

Who or what should be the focus or subject of the sentence? Then what should be the verb?

BETTER: The video game, Eden Ring, appeals to teenagers.

2. **WEAK:** Something we all need is love.

BETTER:

3. **WEAK:** It was expected of my boss that I learn two more languages.

BETTER:

4. **WEAK:** When Rose Zhang, the most decorated player in amateur women's golf history was only 20, the decision to turn pro was made by her.

BETTER:

5. **WEAK:** The reason I write in my gratitude journal on a nightly basis is because I can appreciate my blessings more fully.

BETTER:

6. **WEAK:** There have been times when medical professionals declared the burning sensation consumers get from the flaming hot Cheetos similar to a mild opiate addiction as it causes the release of endorphins.

BETTER:

7. **WEAK:** "Adolescence is not a disease, that adolescence is an amazing time of development," was argued by Beatriz Luna, professor of psychiatry and pediatrics at the University of Pittsburgh.

BETTER:

8. **WEAK:** The result Tallulah Willis, daughter of Bruce Willis, hopes to achieve is to document his life, taking tons of photos, noticing stuff she never paid attention to, since he has been diagnosed with dementia.

BETTER:

ANSWER KEY:

2. We need love.
3. My boss expected me to learn two new languages.
4. At 20, Rose Zhang, the most decorated player in amateur women's golf history, turned (or decided to turn) pro.
5. I write in my gratitude journal nightly to appreciate my blessing more fully.
6. Medical professionals declared the burning sensation consumers get from the flaming hot Cheetos similar to a mild opiate addiction as it causes the release of endorphins.
7. Beatriz Luna, professor of psychiatry and pediatrics at the University of Pittsburgh, argues "...adolescence is not a disease, that adolescence is an amazing time of development."
8. Tallulah Willis, daughter of Bruce Willis, hopes to document his life, taking tons of photos, noticing stuff she never paid attention to, since he has been diagnosed with dementia.