Aggie Grammar Guide: Revising To-Be Verbs

While to be verbs (is, are, am, was, were, has been, have been, had been, will be, will have been, being, etc.) remain useful and necessary in certain situations, gone unchecked they can slow your reader down and confuse your message. In order to write livelier, more engaging prose, consider editing out as many to be verbs as possible without losing meaning. Note there + to be is a common construction that you might want to revise because it could cause your reader to lose track of your subject.

Revision Strategies

Revision option one: Replace lone to be verbs or those connected to the verb have; AND/OR there is, are, was, were, have been constructions with a stronger verb.

- Example 1: There was nothing more isolating than being at a place I did not feel welcome.
- Revision 1: Being at a place I did not feel welcome isolated me most. (The verb became the subject “being” and the adjective became the verb “isolated.”)
- Example 2: Wheat is known for being used in both food cultures of Mexico and Italy.
- Revision 2: Both Mexican and Italian food cultures rely on wheat.

Revision option two: Replace to be verbs with a stronger verb and move information around in the sentence to enhance clarity.

- Example: If parents do not talk to them about sex, the media is the one educating them, but it is portraying unrealistic views of the sexual content as casual hook-ups.
- Revision: If parents do not talk to their kids about sex, the media will educate them through the unrealistic portrayal of sex, including casual hookups.

Necessary to be constructions:

Sometimes you need to use a to be verb as a linking verb to maintain meaning or describe something:

- Example: Thus, full hybrids are fuel-efficient, environmentally friendly and drive like conventional cars. (Emphasis on description)
- Example: She became so excited, reflecting on the moment, that her arms started to perform in the air as if she were on the rock. (Meaning)
Intermediate Practice

Revise the following sentences to eliminate to be verbs without altering meaning. Feel free to revise the main verb to make it stronger or more active.

Please note, because revising to be verbs deals with style more than grammar rules, there may be multiple revision options although you will see only one option in the answer key. Compare your revision to the possible revision and determine if one is more effective. One way to do that is to determine which revision has fewer words but still maintains the original sentence's meaning.

Example: In conclusion, to be a Doctor requires a lot of knowledge, and that is why doctors charge so much.

Revision: In conclusion, becoming a doctor requires a lot of knowledge, and doctors charge so much because of that.

1) This technology is a solution to the current conundrum America is facing.

2) People are able to get the right expertise at the right time.

3) However, sometimes things go wrong with vaccines and there are some complications, but it is rare when that happens.

4) Many debate whether voluntary associations during the time of the Great Reforms were successful in shaping a middle-class identity.

5) Although Barban and Kurkjian agree on the importance of certain details of the short story, the reasoning behind their importance is different.

6) In addition, this section is all English and the author does not use figurative language.
Advanced Practice

First, for each sentence, underline all the to be verbs; some sentences have more than one. Second, in some of the sentences, unnecessary to be verb constructions cause confusion. If the sentence is confusing and the to be verb should be cut, revise it to clarify the idea without losing meaning. Are there any to be verbs that must remain? If so, explain why the to be verb(s) is/are necessary.

Please note, because revising to be verbs deals with style more than grammar rules, there may be multiple revision options although you will see only one option in the answer key. Compare your revision to the answer and determine if one is more effective. One way to do that is to determine which revision has fewer words but still maintains the original sentence's meaning.

Example: Mobile phones are key products to make the system succeed because they are easily handled by most people even people who did not receive sufficient education.

Revision: Mobile phones increase the system’s success because most people can easily use them.

Example: The purpose of this section is to explain the how (what they will use), why (reasons for creating the product), who (the population), and where (the location).

Necessary to be verb: We could not revise this sentence to cut the to be verb without cutting the word ’purpose’ which is an academic term necessary to maintain the writer’s idea.

1) A hybrid is a vehicle whose powertrain combines two or more sources of power that can directly or indirectly propel the vehicle.

2) That is why it is important for cultural values to continue in Inupiat communities because it allows them to reflect on their cultural values and see their importance in the Inupiat community.

3) The way that pizza has been changed in different food cultures shows how dough is still used as a main ingredient but still not prepared like its original background which is the Italian way of using leavened dough.

4) Chinese Mandarin is my first language, and I am fluent in English since I learned it over ten years.
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Answer Key

Intermediate Practice
What follows are possible revisions to alleviate to be verb construction in order to clarify ideas or make the sentence more precise.

1) This technology solves the current conundrum America faces.
2) People can access the right expertise at the right time.
3) However, sometimes things go wrong with vaccines, causing some complications, but that rarely happens.
4) Many debate whether voluntary associations during the time of the Great Reforms succeeded in shaping a middle-class identity.
5) Although Barban and Kurkjian agree on the importance of certain details of the short story, the reasoning behind their importance differs.
6) In addition, this section includes only English and the author does not use figurative language.

Advanced Practice
What follows are the location of each to be verb bolded in the original sentence and then possible revisions to each sentence that alleviate to be verb constructions while clarifying meaning.

1) Original: A hybrid is a vehicle whose powertrain combines two or more sources of power that can directly or indirectly propel the vehicle.
Revision: A hybrid vehicle’s powertrain combines two or more sources of power that directly or indirectly propel the vehicle.

2) Original: That is why it is important for cultural values to continue in Inupiat communities because it allows them to reflect on their cultural values and see their importance in the Inupiat community.
Revision: Cultural values must continue in Inupiat communities because these values encourage the community to reflect upon them and see their importance.

3) Original: The way that pizza has been changed in different food cultures shows how dough is still used as a main ingredient but still not prepared like its original background which is the Italian way using leavened dough.
Revision: Although different cultures have deviated from the Italian version which uses unleavened dough, pizza remains important in various food cultures.

4) Original: Chinese Mandarin is my first language, and I am fluent in English since I learned it over ten years.
Necessary to be verbs (No revision): Chinese Mandarin is my first language, and I am fluent in English since I learned it over ten years. (The to be verbs in this sentence are linking verbs and necessary to maintain meaning.)