

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)

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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.

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

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

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.

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, locate 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.

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.*

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- 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.)