



*He went up the stairs.* You can picture that, right? But **how exactly** did he “went up the stairs”? *Quickly*, that’s better. How quickly? *Very quickly*. *Very, very quickly!* *Extremely quickly!* *Exceedingly quickly!* *Supremely quickly!* *Astonishingly quickly!*

These are solutions inexperienced writers, or maybe middle school students, use to fix a sentence when asked to be more specific (or when they’re trying to reach the teacher’s word count). But the approach is faulty. The verb is the problem. No matter how many intensifying adverbs you chase after that defective verb, you’re not fixing the sentence.

*Went*. That’s the problem. I can’t picture anyone *wenting*. You need a better, more precise verb. He walked up the stairs. That I see. He ran up the stairs. Sure, *ran* is faster than *walked*. Bounded, leaped, dashed, flew, trudged, dragged himself, lumbered, pounded, climbed, skipped, scampered, hopped, danced, sprinted, galloped, swaggered, limped, pranced, tiptoed, glided. Each of those verbs conjure different images, and even moods, in the reader’s mind. Who dances up the stairs when depressed? Who drags himself when elated? Who tiptoes unless they’re sneaking? When I read *sprinted*, I see lanes, a starter’s pistol, the Olympic 100-meter dash. When I read *limped*, I assume injury and feel sympathy. *Pounded* is angry. *Lumbered* is awkward, out of breath, struggling.

The verb is the heart of every sentence. It creates the action, which is the point of most sentences. But verbs also inject emotion. Years ago, I read a book review in which the critic strove to dismiss the author’s skill. I don’t remember the name of the critic, author, or book, but I’ll never forget the verb the critic used in the first paragraph:

John Smith (not the author’s name) has *perpetrated* another novel.

Talk about disdain. Most of us associate *perpetrated* with crimes. Here, the critic deployed it to describe a novel as a crime against literature or against readers. So much emotion in just one word.

Much public health writing strives to leave out emotions and let facts speak for themselves. But even in public health writing, we tell stories. Good stories should **con**jure up memorable

images. Well-selected nouns and verbs do most of the work in every sentence and go most of the way toward creating memorable images . . . and great stories. Be specific. Select carefully.

**Practice: Find stronger verbs for these sentences.**

1. The epidemiologist **looked at** the lab results.
2. The workshop **has** lab exercises with computer-based data analysis.
3. The program **gives more** capacity for outbreak detection.

**Suggested Answers:**

1. Examined, studied, analyzed
2. Incorporates, combines, merges
3. Expands, increases, extends