

RE-VERBING

The great American writer, Ernest Hemingway, was famous for saying that the best writing was often the simplest writing. He said he always tried to cut away any “ornamentation” from his writing.

Now Hemingway had the advantage of not having to write for a GCSE exam which tests how well you can “use a range of vocabulary and sentence structure...” It will be important to make sure you show-off a bit in the exam, impressing the examiner with the way you can use sentences of different lengths and dazzling them with your vocabulary.

But sometimes a little can achieve a lot.

It’s a good idea when you are writing to think about whether you have chosen the most effective verb, rather than add two or three adverbs to the one you have used. Let’s look at a sentence to explore this idea further.

I went down the station platform towards the fight.

the verb – *went* - doesn’t give us much idea about how the person is going along the platform. We could put in an adverb, like *quickly*, to give more information. But we could also just change the verb. So we might say:

I tore down the platform towards the fight

Or

I hustled down the platform towards the fight

Or

I mooched down the platform towards the fight

Each of the three verb changes give a quite different feel to the person’s feeling about the fight.

ACTIVITY 1.

1. Change the verb (underlined for you) in each of the following sentences to give a clearer view of the scene to your reader:
 - Sumitra looked at her brother across the table.
 - The dog barked at the stranger
 - A car drove up to the very edge of the pavement

- *James sat on the rocks at the top of the beach*

2. Swap your work with a partner. Each of you must now change the verb again to alter the feel of the sentence.

ACTIVITY 2

1. Read this extract, which is the opening to a narrative written by a student in their GCSE exam.

He looked intently and firmly into the mirror. He swooped his fingers gently and delicately through his hair and grabbed his tie harshly to straighten it. "Looking good," he almost said out loud to himself but didn't. His client was sitting uncomfortably and low down in an expensive leather office chair. He coughed loudly and roughly and when this didn't get any reaction from Leroy he did it again. The detective spun round swiftly and hurriedly on the heel of his expensive hand-made Italian shoes.

"Are we going to talk properly about the case or are you going to spend the rest of the time staring and gazing at yourself in the mirror?"

The detective showed absolutely no sort of emotion but simply commented "patience is a virtue" and then he turned quickly back to look with great care and concentration on his reflection.

2. There is a lot of "ornamentation" in this piece of writing. For example, the opening sentence uses two adverbs, *intently* and *firmly*, to modify the verb *looked*. Ernest Hemingway might have just written "*He stared into the mirror*".

Re-write this piece, editing it down to cut out words or phrases you think are unnecessary and changing some of the verbs to give a clearer picture to the reader of the way things are happening.

ACTIVITY 3

Look carefully at the photographs below. Write a sentence about each of them where the verbs you use capture the action powerfully.

