

Avoid Adjectives Derived from Verbs



Verbs lose their punch when needlessly converted to adjectives. A drab verb must be used and extra words are needed. Readability suffers. In the following examples from the scientific literature, 40 to 100% extra words were needed when verbs were changed to adjectives.

As written (5 words): Dicaba was injurious to alfalfa.

Better (3 words): Dicamba injured alfalfa.

As written (8 words): The antidote produced a protective effect on corn.

Better (4 words): The antidote protected corn.

As written (5 words): Propham is inhibitory to mitosis.

Better (3 words): Propham inhibits mitosis.

As written (7 words): The herbicide exerted stimulating action on fungi.

Better (4 words): The herbicide stimulated fungi.

As written (7 words): Tillage was destructive to new bindweed shoots.

Better (5 words): Tillage destroyed new bindweed shoots.

While various drab verbs, such as “produce” and “exert”, can be associated with adjectives derived from verbs, “to be” is probably the most common. The following pairs of word groups mean the same, but the one without “to be” is shorter, more direct, and more forceful:

to be injurious to = to injure
to be reductive of = to reduce
to be inhibitory to = to inhibit
to be stimulatory to = to stimulate
to be suppressive to = to suppress
to be incapacitating to = to incapacitate

Adjectives derived from verbs are not always troublesome. Whenever you want to write about the effect of the verb, sentences like the following are appropriate.

The injurious activity lasted 10 days.

The stimulatory effect on roots compensated for foliar injury.

His discriminatory program was illegal.

But whenever such a verb-derived adjective is used with a drab verb, the sentence usually can be improved by eliminating the drab verb and by changing the adjective back to the verb from which it came. Remember:

When verbs are changed to adjectives,
They often lose their snap;
The verb “to be” is a warning sign,
You may be in this trap.

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