



To Be or Not To Be: Efficacy of Focused Efforts at Correcting Overuse of 'To Be' in a 2018 First-Year Writing Seminar



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The Problem

One of the most consistent problems afflicting first-year writing is overuse of the verb "to be." Weaker writers tend to rely heavily on variants of "to be" – is, am, are, was, were, be, been – in order to move their writing forward. While some disciplines and writing styles employ "to be" as a standard, in argumentative essay writing overuse creates two primary problems:

1. It deadens writing through repetition and a narrowing of the range of verb usage, which creates challenges for retaining audience attention
2. It deprives "to be" of its potential impact, losing its value as a textual equals sign

Helping students to learn how to recognize and limit their overuse of "to be" presents a significant challenge to any teacher of a writing class. Importantly, the goal is *not* to teach students to never use "to be" in their writing. Rather, students need to gain awareness and control of their verb usage, and learn to deploy "to be" in their writing with intention and to good effect.

The Study

The purpose of this study lies in gauging the effectiveness of my interventions to correct "to be" overuse in one class, over the course of a single semester: a Medieval Studies FWS on medieval geography titled *Orbis Terrarum: The Medieval World was a Globe*, offered in the Spring semester of the 2017-2018 academic year at Cornell.

Specifically, I am interested in assessing the following four aspects:

- the degree to which my efforts have affected my students' understanding of the problems of "to be" overuse in writing generally
- to what degree student writing changed over the course of the semester with regard to "to be" overuse
- whether or not specific interventions provided more benefit than others
- how useful students found different interventions for addressing overuse in their own writing

Data Types and Collection

This study takes a two-pronged approach, considering both quantitative data from student essays and self-reported survey data gathered from 14 participants.

Usage Rates in Essays

Students wrote five formal essays during the semester. I have taken each essay and, excluding quotes drawn from external sources, counted the total number of "to be" verbs. I used this result to calculate a rate of "to be" usage per 100 words, again excluding quoted materials, and then charted change in usage over time.

Student Survey

At the conclusion of the semester my students completed a six-question survey that asked them to rate, on a scale of 1-4, their awareness of "to be" overuse as a general problem in writing at the beginning and end of the semester, and the effectiveness of class activities and instructor feedback in increasing their understanding of the issue

Points of Intervention

1. In-Class Introduction: Before Essay 2

I introduced the issues related to "to be" overuse in the first part of the semester. I led a class discussion about the problems of overuse and the value of "to be", and showed anonymous examples of both overuse and appropriate use drawn from their initial essays

2. "To Be" Informal Paper: Before Essay 2

Students wrote a one-page informal paper in which they could *only* use "to be", and no other verbs. They brought this paper to class and worked with a partner to rewrite the paper, replacing extraneous "to be" verbs and identifying those places where "to be" made sense within the context of their papers. We then had a class discussion about the exercise, and looked at examples from their papers

3. Passive Voice Informal Paper: Before Essay 2

This exercise took the same form as the first informal paper, but asked students to write the assignment using only the passive voice. Passive constructions rely on "to be" to operate, so addressing passive voice overuse also draws attention to "to be" usage

4. Peer Examples: Before Essays 3 and 4

Students critiqued examples of "to be" overuse drawn anonymously from their classmates' previous essays

5. Peer Draft Editing: Before Essays 3 and 4

As part of their in-class peer editing of drafts for essays 3 and 4, I required students to underline each instance of "to be" in their partner's essay, and suggest alternative verbs and/or sentence structures

6. Instructor-Produced Examples: Before Essays 4 and 5

Students critiqued "to be" overuse in example sentences written by the instructor

7. Direct instructor feedback: Essays 2, 3, and 4

Direct feedback on each essay highlighted every instance of "to be" and included both end comments and marginal notes about students' use of "to be"

Results

Students	Total "To Be" Verbs					Total Words					"To Be" Rate Per 100 Words				
	Essay 1	Essay 2	Essay 3	Essay 4	Essay 5	Essay 1	Essay 2	Essay 3	Essay 4	Essay 5	Essay 1	Essay 2	Essay 3	Essay 4	Essay 5
1	22	45	49	20	59	543	795	1470	1425	2165	4.0516	5.6604	3.3333	1.4035	2.7252
2	22	32	16	27	94	591	877	1631	1439	3227	3.7225	3.6488	0.9810	1.8763	2.9129
3	11	28	30	22	32	519	825	1533	1360	2490	2.1195	3.3939	1.9569	1.6176	1.2851
4	22	43	57	46	143	562	1098	1381	1496	3108	3.9146	3.9162	4.1274	3.0749	4.6010
5	22	25	61	39	64	662	816	1681	1674	2398	3.3233	3.0637	3.6288	2.3297	2.6689
6	19	24	54	40	32	447	459	1456	1448	774	4.2506	5.2288	3.7088	2.7624	4.1344
7	30	47	63	90	131	743	924	1611	1804	3138	4.0377	5.0866	3.9106	4.9889	4.1746
8	35	71	58	38	90	656	1034	1611	1523	2687	5.3354	6.8665	3.6002	2.4951	3.3495
9	26	54	52	61	86	611	834	1538	1562	1763	4.2553	6.4748	3.3810	3.9052	4.8780
10	32	28	33	49	50	676	1273	1725	2365	4259	4.7337	2.1995	1.9130	2.0719	1.1740
11	18	18	35	23	70	582	676	1203	867	2369	3.0928	2.6627	2.9094	2.6528	2.9548
12	27	24	70	58	139	606	875	1473	1462	2883	4.4554	2.7429	4.7522	3.9672	4.8214
13	29	18	58	33	43	628	764	1330	1027	2850	4.6178	2.3560	4.3609	3.2132	1.5088
14	20	41	32	21	67	535	941	1748	1702	2527	3.7383	4.3571	1.8307	1.2338	2.6514
Averages	23.9286	35.5714	47.7143	40.5	78.5714	597.214	870.786	1527.93	1511	2617	3.9749	4.1184	3.1710	2.6852	3.0023

Fig. 1: Total "to be" usage, word count, and usage rates per 100 words in student essays

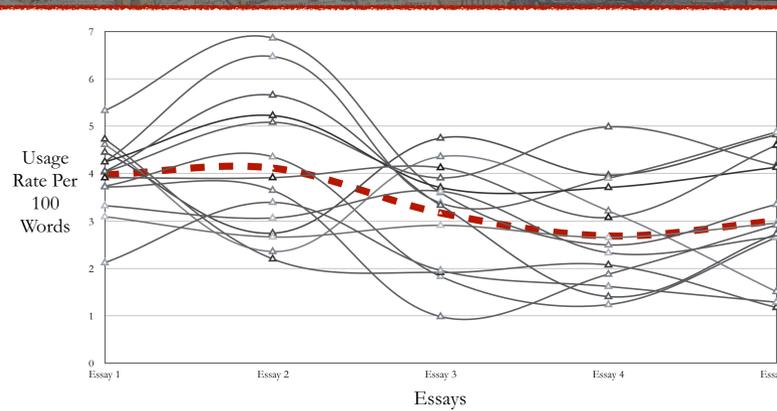


Fig. 2: Individual student "to be" usage graphed over the semester, showing class average

Questions		Class Average
1	At the beginning of the Spring 2018 semester, I was aware of overuse of "to be" as an issue in writing generally.	2
2	At the end of the Spring 2018 semester, I am aware of overuse of "to be" as an issue in writing generally.	3.67
3	Class exercises helped me to increase my awareness of this issue.	3.75
4	Instructor feedback helped me to increase my awareness of this issue.	3.75
5	Increased awareness of this issues has helped me to improve my writing.	3.5
6	I currently use the verb "to be" appropriately in my writing.	3.08

Fig. 3: Survey questions and averaged results

Analysis and Conclusions

Usage Rate

1. In total, the class saw a marked decrease in "to be" usage, suggesting overall effectiveness of the interventions
2. Informal Papers were less immediately effective than I had anticipated
 - Both activities preceded an increase in average usage rate in the study, from 3.98 to 4.12 instances per 100 words
 - This is somewhat surprising, given that in past classes students have singled out these activities as being the most useful in helping their writing
3. Peer-based activities correlate most obviously with successful reduction in usage rate
 - The essays showing the lowest usage rates are those for which students had directed peer feedback on "to be" at the draft stage
 - Essay 5, which had no such peer feedback, shows an increase in rate
4. Essay 5 results suggest a cumulative effect
 - Results show significant improvements from Essays 1 and 2, which also had no directed peer feedback in the draft process
 - In all three essays students were left to their own devices in the writing process to mitigate "to" usage
 - This decrease in usage rates point to a learned and applied awareness of "to be" overuse in their writing
 - Earlier interventions, even where they appear to have negative effects in the data, set the stage for the successes of later endeavors
5. I was surprised by the low rates of usage, even at the start of the semester
 - The low rates mean a lower percentage of desired change in student writing than I was anticipating
 - This suggests a need for a greater degree of empathy for student pushback on this issue on my part in future classes
 - It also suggests an avenue for explanation to STEM students, who should recognize the potential impact of a 1% change to the outcome of a calculation or the composition of a solution

Student Survey

1. Efforts over the course of the semester improved students' awareness of the issue
 - Students reported a general lack of awareness at the start of the class
 - 5 out of 13 participants chose 1 (Strongly Disagree) in response to this question
 - Students reported a marked increase in awareness at the conclusion of the class
 - 8 of 13 participants chose 4 (Strongly Agree) in response to Question 2
 - All participants chose either 3 (Somewhat Agree) or 4 (Strongly Agree) in response to this question
2. The largest changes in awareness correlate to the most significant drops in rate of usage
 - The students who identified as being least aware of the issue at the start of the semester, and most aware of the issue at the end of the semester also showed the most change in their use of "to be"
 - Students who reported the smallest changes in awareness also showed the least change in their usage rate
3. Student assessment of both class activities and instructor feedback indicate similar degrees of effectiveness
 - This is at odds with the usage rate numbers, but consistent with the idea of a cumulative effect
4. Student assessment of their own use of "to be" is unrelated to their actual usage rates
 - All participants but one chose 3 (Somewhat Agree) in response to Question 6. My sense is that this response demonstrates students' desire to choose a safe, middle-of-the-road answer that reflects both their uncertainty in their answer and their positive feelings about their own capabilities
 - In light of these responses, it appears that a 4-option survey is too limited to capture any truly useful data related to student self-assessment
 - Future assessments should be done on a 5+ option scale