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Teen Writer! The Power of Verbs

Exciting fiction is all about *action*, and award-winning writer Gina Catanzarite reveals exercises to help teens build a strong “verb vocabulary.” Use just the right verb to describe everything from exhilarating action sequences to dramatic heartfelt moments in your plot, and your fiction will come alive life in the readers’ imagination!

TRANSCRIPT

Gina Catanzarite:

Hey, welcome to my writing studio. Today, we’re talking about writing exciting *action scenes*. And fiction is *all about action*, right? Things happen to your character, and your character reacts.

In grammar, a **verb** is the part of speech that describes action. A verb could also describe a state of being. When I say “state of being,” I mean *being sad, being surprised, being determined*.

Right now, we’re just going to focus on verbs that describe *action and physical motions*.

These kids jump in the waves. Jump is the action, so jump is the verb in this sentence.

There’s *plenty* of action going on here. These kids are playing, they’re running, they’re kicking. Those are all *verbs*.

Fiction is about transporting readers to another world. If you want them to imagine the same world *you’re seeing in your head*, it’s really important to use *specific* verbs to describe action.

For instance – what if I asked you to imagine this scene: *The bully hit the boy*. Hit is the action, so hit is the verb in this sentence.

What did the *action* of “hitting” look like when you imagined it? Now let me ask you this:

What if I *changed* the verb?

What if I said, *the bully punched the boy*.

The bully slapped the boy.

Pounded the boy.

Pummeled the boy.

You probably imagined a very different action every time the verb changed - and that's a good thing! Every time you use a more specific verb, your writing becomes more vivid in the reader's imagination.

If you have trouble thinking of different verbs, you can always use a *thesaurus*. A thesaurus is a book that lists words that are similar in meaning. Words that are similar meaning are called *synonyms*. And you can find plenty of free thesauruses online.

Now it's *your* turn to try it. Let's start with a very common action: *walking*.

People walk in lots of different ways. It depends on where they are. . . What they're doing . . . Even how they're feeling.

Take a look at *this* woman. She's walking, sure – but can you come up with a verb to describe the *specific way* she's walking? Maybe you described that purposeful walk as *striding*. Then she checks her watch, and her pace changes. Maybe at that point, you thought of it as *jogging*. Or *sprinting*. Or *dashing*.

Remember, there's no *right or wrong* answer here. Creative writing is about how *you* see the world – so describe it the way *you* see it. Try this one.

What verb would you use to describe how *this* woman is walking? Maybe you thought of her as *strolling*. Or *wandering*. *Meandering*. Those are all verbs that can be used to describe somebody who is *walking slowly*.

Jumping is another common action. . . And like walking, people jump in a lot of different ways for a lot of different reasons. What verb would you use to describe *this girl's* action?

Did you think she was leaping? Hopping? Bouncing? Remember – there's no wrong answer. It's how *you* see it.

Personally, I think one of the best ways to practice verbs is to describe the action of *dancing*. There are *so many* different styles of dance. You'll get *a lot* of practice coming up with verbs to describe them all! Sometimes, it may even call for a little additional research, especially if you're studying different cultural and folk dances. These dances are steeped in tradition, and knowing the specific origins of the dances, the specific names of the dance moves, is another way to add rich details to your fiction.

You know, humans aren't the only living creatures that move. Think about verbs that would describe the actions of a *pet*. . . Or an animal you see in nature . . . Or at a zoo or at an aquarium. What verb would you use to describe the way this little guy runs? Maybe you thought of the verb *scampering*. *Scurrying*. *Romping*.

Things move, too. Waves crash on the beach. Weeds sway in the breeze, flags flap and flutter in the wind. Pay attention to the way people and animals and things move, and start adding more *specific verbs* to your fiction. The world is a dynamic place. Action, activity, motion – it’s all around us. . . And it’s just waiting for a writer *like you* to describe it!

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