

Avoiding To-do Phrases

“Tell me and I will forget. Show me and I will remember.

Inspire me and I will get involved.”

—Benjamin Franklin paraphrasing Buddha

Sometimes, it is okay to tell, but not always. In Deep POV, the goal is to show what is happening and not tell or explain the reason to the reader. Just show the evidence and the reaction.

To-do phrases, also known as full *infinitive* or *to-infinitive* phrases, are used to tell (explain) why a character does something (this or that).

These to-do phrases often replace “*in order to*” phrases.

Most to-do phrases start with *because*, *by*, *to*, and *with*, followed by an action verb or adverb, but not always. With practice, you will spot these unwanted to-do telling/explaining phrases.

Note:

You cannot reword every instance of a to-do phrase (full infinitive or to-infinitive) in your manuscript, but you will find many you can.

A few common to-do phrase examples:

to bake	to hear	to seem
to celebrate	to hit	to sit
to crawl	to kiss	to sleep
to cut	to look	to sound
to dance	to meet	to think
to decide	to realize	to touch

to feel
to grab

to run
to see

to watch
to wonder

Other common to-do phrases to watch for:

because . . .
because he
because of
because she
because the ...
because they

by . . .
by her
by his
by the ...
by their

to . . .
with . . .
with her
with his
with the ...
with their

Issue: (to kiss)

Joe scooted closer to kiss Sue.

► Grammatically this sentence is correct. But this is explaining/telling why/how Joe is doing something.

Fix:

Joe scooted closer and kissed Sue.

► Removing the to-do phrase (to kiss) reads better.

Issue: (with the)

The knife slid off the table. Joe caught it, but he cut his fingers with the sharp blade.

► There is nothing wrong with this sentence. But if you want to write tighter and deeper, this violates Deep POV principles. This is explaining/telling why/how Joe cut his fingers.

Fix:

The sharp knife slid off the table. Joe caught it, but he cut his fingers.

► Removing the explaining/telling to-do phrase (with the) makes this sentence more to the point.

Or.

The sharp knife slid off the table. Joe caught it, and blood dropped from his hand.

► This sentence reads better. It has more imagery. Here, the word “*cut*” is not used. The reader knows by the blood dripping that Joe cut his hand. This imagery boosts the reader’s imagination.

Related:

To-do phrases (*infinitives*) can be made worse by adding the word form of “**begin, start, want, turn**” at the beginning. These three-word phrases make a sentence wordy and ambiguous, a command issue with novice writers.

Examples:

begin to run	begins to run	beginning to run	began to run
start to cry	starts to cry	starting to cry	started to cry
want to cry	wants to cry	wanting to cry	wanted to cry
turn to look	turns to look	turning to look	turned to look

If something is happening, cut the wordiness and show what is happening.

Issue: (began to run)

Sue *began to run* into the alley.

Fix:

Sue ran into the alley.

Issue: (started to fall)

Snowflakes started to fall.

Fix:

Snowflakes fell.

Or

Snowflakes danced in the air

Issue: (wanted to run)

Sue *wanted to run* into the alley.

Fix:

Sue ran into the alley.

Issue: (tuned to look)

Sue *turned to look* at her boyfriend.

Fix:

Sue faced her boyfriend.

In Summary:

The more you avoid these pesky to-do (full infinitive, to-infinitive) explaining/telling phrases, the tighter your writing will become. Doing this will also enhance the plot.

Yes, some writers use the “begin to, start to, want to” phrase, to show a pause in the action (motion).

But eliminating most of these telling, wordy, phrases will make your writing more to the point and more engaging for the reader.