

Don't Be Passive: Developing an Engaging Active Writing Voice

What is the passive voice?

You are using the passive voice in a sentence if the *subject* of the sentence is being acted upon rather than acting itself.

Passive Voice: An anvil was dropped on the coyote by the roadrunner.

Active Voice: The roadrunner dropped an anvil on the coyote.

In the “passive” sentence above, we learn about the victim of the anvil—the coyote—before we learn about the party responsible for dropping the anvil—the roadrunner. The “active” sentence, by contrast, first introduces the roadrunner. Think about the sentences above as descriptions of a cartoon clip: in the “passive” sentence, your attention as a viewer would probably be focused on the confused and then clobbered coyote. In the “active” sentence, you’d instead be watching the roadrunner’s glee as he thwarted his perennial enemy. The structure of the sentence determines which character gets more visibility on the screen, and perhaps more sympathy from the viewer. Either of the above constructions could be the best one to use, depending on what’s more important to the cartoon. The same is true for the written sentences.

Why do people keep telling me to avoid the passive voice?

According to the Capital Community College Foundation,

We find an overabundance of the passive voice in sentences created by self-protective business interests, magniloquent educators, and bombastic military writers (who must get weary of this accusation), who use the passive voice to avoid responsibility for actions taken. Thus "Cigarette ads were designed to appeal especially to children" places the burden on the ads — as opposed to "We designed the cigarette ads to appeal especially to children," in which "we" accepts responsibility. At a White House press briefing we might hear that "The President was advised that certain members of Congress were being audited" rather than "The Head of the Internal Revenue service advised the President that her agency was auditing certain members of Congress" because the passive construction avoids responsibility for advising and for auditing.¹

What do strategies of political or corporate obfuscation (and, for that matter, a monomaniacal cartoon coyote) have to do with your academic writing? They indicate why writers are tempted—sometimes for perfectly legitimate reasons—to conceal the identity of the person, organization, or spastic bird responsible for the action of the sentence. But, more importantly, they show that this kind of concealment is *intentional*. When you use the passive voice, you are choosing to give your reader only a certain amount of information. And if you’re making that choice because you don’t have any more information to give, or because you don’t know how to express that

¹ <http://webster.comnet.edu/grammar/passive.htm>, accessed 2 May 2005.

information, then you aren't as in control of your sentence as you could be. That lack of control translates into sloppy, unclear prose.

How to avoid passive constructions when you write and edit

Since the passive voice is so often a product of imprecision, many developing writers work on weeding it out of their prose during the revision process. The more regularly you revise for a particular element of style, the more likely you'll avoid misusing it in future first drafts. Try these steps for identifying passive constructions in your writing.

1. Passive voice involves a combination of the verb *to be* plus a past participle (past participles of regular verbs end in -ed; irregular verbs end in a variety of other ways). Scan your paper for any of the following:
 - a general overabundance of the use of the verb *to be* (*is, are, was, were, be, am, being, been*);
 - verb phrases that include the verb *to be*, such as "*is written*," "*was discovered by*," "*are being presented*," etc.;
 - sentences that begin with "It is," "There is," "This is," "What is," "It was discovered that..." etc.
2. Try switching the sentence into the active voice on a separate piece of paper. Sometimes this will be a simple process of locating the subject and placing it at the beginning of your sentence rather than at the end:

Moby Dick was written by Herman Melville. ⇨ Herman Melville wrote *Moby Dick*.

If your passive sentence doesn't have a subject, you'll need to add one in order to make it active. This often indicates that your original sentence was unnecessarily vague:

The Battle of Ayacucho was lost. ⇨ The Spanish lost the Battle of Ayacucho.

3. Ask yourself whether you need to present the sentence (or part of the sentence) in passive language. Would the meaning change significantly—for the worse—if you switched the structure around?

Here's an example of a sentence that depends on a passive construction for its meaning:

The actor was hit by a car last week and could not perform in last night's play.

The most important agent in this sentence is the actor, not the car; changing the first clause around to "A car hit the actor last week" would not transition smoothly into the second clause, and would confusingly present the car as more meaningful than the actor who was hit. Most importantly, the changed version just wouldn't sound right. Read your revisions out loud as a final means of checking for clarity.

If you've determined that your sentence doesn't need to be written in the passive voice, change it around. Any sentences that *do* need to be written passively will be all the more effective if they are surrounded by precise, active prose.

Additional resources

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/539/01/>

Purdue's online writing lab offers this guide to identifying passive voice and reconfiguring passive to active.

<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/passive.htm>

This passive/active guide from the Capital Community College online grammar pages includes a practice quiz.