

Writing Problems and Passive Voiced Verbs

The passive voicing of verbs creates counterintuitive phrases and clauses. This voicing reverses the natural sequence of events in time. ie. “The 2002 earthquake’s devastation was allowed to occur through the shoddy construction practices of the boomtown era of the late 19th century.” Note that the end of the sentence refers to a time more than 100 years before the event the sentence first addresses. Active voicing mirrors the natural sequence of events in time, ie. “The shoddy construction practices of the late 19th century set the stage for the devastation of the 2002 earthquake,”

In passive voice phrases and sentences the result precedes the cause and the actor is often absent from the scene of the action. For example: “The demonstrators were restrained.” This sort of phraseology gives a very inadequate picture of what occurred. Sometimes people do this on purpose, to hide what happened.

Similarly, the passive voice is a fantastic way to avoid personal or group responsibility. Pronouns like I or we go missing, making it easier to distance the action from any live human beings.

For example, White House Press secretary noted that “Mistakes were made,” in answer to questions about the failure to organize and deliver governmental aid for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. Similarly Army spokesmen note that “Mistakes were made” in regards to Walter Reed Hospital’s failure to care for wounded soldiers. Notice what is missing.

The writer who uses passive voiced verbs often has to resort to awkward phrases in an attempt to maintain clarity. ie. “Lady Chatterly’s Lover was forcibly removed from bookstores in Suffolk England. The same reason that Lady Chatterly’s Lover was censored for led to the subsequent relocation to Taos, New Mexico that D. H. Lawrence felt he had to do to get away from uptight attitudes like Suffolk had.” How about this? “Disgusted with Lady Chatterly’s Lover, the Mayor of Suffolk removed the book from city bookstores. Feeling disgust of his own, D. H. Lawrence left Suffolk and moved to Taos New Mexico.”

There are legitimate uses for the passive voice; for example, when a writer wishes to emphasize the object of the action over the subject, she might write “The ball was kicked by Jack,” as opposed to the dog. Another use is to differentiate the actor, as in “the ball was kicked by Jack,” but not Jill.

In the same way, the passive voice can be used well to emphasize results (“The quarter was ended successfully”...by whom?) but consider that the active voice works equally well (“We ended our quarter on the biggest revenues of our company history.”)

Novice writers often believe that the passive voice sounds more objective, but since when were clarity and objectivity mutually opposed? If you use the passive voice to appropriate authority and approximate objectivity, educated readers will distrust your work.

Objectivity is in one’s methods and information, not in the writing. Communicating with simplicity and clarity doesn’t dumb down your ideas, and you can’t fix flawed or inadequate information with distant, neutral and authoritative language.

Proper use of the Passive/Active voice contrast.

Again – here are three sentences about the same thing. The contrast between the active and passive voice helps the reader understand the focus or emphasis:

“The cook fries the rice. He also keeps his eye on the boiling eggs.” (focus on the cook, the source of the action).

“The rice is being fried by the cook. It has to attain the right texture.” (focus on the rice the target of the action).

“The rice is being fried. This allows the buttered spice to permeate each grain.” (the actor – is irrelevant and disappears leaving the target in a state of transformation)

Using the Passive Voice to distort, deflect, mislead. Consider these sentences:

If women don't want to be harassed, they should stop wearing halters and shorts.

vs

If women wear halters and shorts, men will harass them.

A nineteen year old woman gang was gang raped.

vs

Twelve men raped a nineteen year old woman.

A promiscuous high school coed has been shot dead in an “honor” killing.

vs

Three brothers and their father have murdered a local girl.