

Abe's Mother and the Passive Voice

The passive voice is not the enemy of clarity and good style. If misused, it can be – as can any other construction in English. *Avoid the passive voice* and *Always use the active voice* have become orthodox, but such advice is far from sound. This essay explains why.

A cautionary remark

If you're looking generalizations like *Use the passive voice when the actor is unknown*, stop reading. If you're genuinely interested in this matter, then you deserve the entire explanation, and you deserve it in plain language, and it's going to take awhile. It's going to take awhile because the issue is complex, requiring that you consider context, your intended emphasis, and what you can reasonably expect your reader to assume. Ultimately, which voice you use in any sentence is a matter of judgment. And to use good judgment, you have to understand the entire issue – including its aggravating subtleties.

What passives and actives actually are

There's a great deal of confusion about what "voice" means. To be entirely accurate, there are really three voices (though we hear about only two). All of them concern the behavior of the subject of the sentence.

Active voice: The subject is doing something, as in *Sam is editing the report*. The subject of the sentence, "Sam," is performing the action of the verb.

Passive voice: The subject is being acted upon, as in *The policy is being revised*. The subject, "policy," is not doing anything; instead, something is being done to it.

Neutral voice: The subject is merely in a "state of being" (neither acting nor receiving action), as in *The meeting is in Room 901*. Here the subject is "meeting." It is neither acting nor being acted upon; it is neither active nor passive.

Voice has nothing to do with tense

Many people confuse "passive voice" with "past tense," but the two have nothing to do with one another. You can write actives and passives in any tense.

The committee will review the proposal.
The committee is reviewing the proposal.
The committee reviewed the proposal.

Active voice, future tense
Active voice, present tense
Active voice, past tense

The proposal will be reviewed by the committee.
The proposal is being reviewed by the committee.
The proposal was reviewed by the committee.

Passive voice, future tense
Passive voice, present tense
Passive voice, past tense

Remember, whether the sentence is active or passive depends entirely on the behavior of the subject – on whether it is acting or being acted upon. The time of the action is irrelevant.

Don't try to make every sentence active

Don't think that you should try to write every sentence in the active voice. You'll encounter plenty of occasions when common sense requires the passive. In such instances, phrasing your idea in the active voice would be artificial and unemphatic (that is, the sentence would be emphasizing the wrong word as the subject). Consider the following passive expressions.

It's supposed to rain tomorrow.
The priceless painting was stolen last night.
Abraham Lincoln was born in a log cabin.

Believe it or not, some people insist that all three of these sentences are weak merely because they are passive. Such a knee-jerk reaction needs to be seen for what it is, as orthodox nonsense that greatly complicates our saying what we mean.

When we ask the passive-haters to rephrase those sentences and put them into the active voice, here is what they give us:

Meteorologists suppose rain will fall tomorrow.
A thief stole the priceless painting last night.
Abraham Lincoln's mother gave birth to him in a log cabin.

If all we care about is brute grammar, all three of these active expressions are fine. But there are two grave problems with each one. First, the writer's style becomes visible and thus becomes an issue. Second, the active sentences emphasize the wrong thing.

Wait – what do you mean, “style becomes visible”?

In the writing we do at work, we want our style to be invisible. What that means is that we want to write in such a way that the reader pays no attention to how we say a thing, but only to what we say. When any matter of style calls attention to itself, style intrudes. In other words, “style becomes visible.”

Typos clamor for attention, as do errors in punctuation and grammar, pompous words, lengthy sentences, cockeyed phrasing, and stating the obvious. *Meteorologists suppose that rain will fall tonight* is an example of my-pants-are-on-fire style because the simple, conventional way to express the idea is to say *It's supposed to rain tonight*. Because who's doing the supposing is understood, it's irrelevant, and because it's irrelevant, it need not be stated, and because it need not be stated, it should not be stated. And because it is stated, the reader wonders why. Whenever the reader questions the writer's decisions, style intrudes.

A thief stole the priceless painting last night is another example of the sort of screaming, artificial style we get when the writer insists on making every sentence active, and this one verges on the absurd. If what we want to convey is that the priceless painting was stolen, then “painting” must be the word we use as the subject. You would not say, *I have a sore tooth in my mouth*. You would say, *I have sore tooth* and rely on the reader's common sense to supply the whereabouts of your tooth. It is the same with the concepts of “stealing” and “thief.” The reader understands, without our telling him, that when something is stolen, a thief is always involved.

And this brings us to *Abraham Lincoln's mother gave birth to him in a log cabin*, which orbits beyond screaming style. Let's reason this through. Is the reader capable of inferring that Abe's mother is the one who gave birth to him? Might the reader wonder who else could possibly have given birth to him? Does the reader understand that when one is born, a mother is not only nearby but intimately involved in the activity? Furthermore, why, if we want to emphasize

Abraham Lincoln, is “mother” the subject of the sentence? Well, that one’s easy to answer. “Mother” is used as the subject because the writer insists on using the active voice, never mind emphasis, reason, and common sense.

The fault in analysis

If I described a fish as “a thing with scales,” I’d be telling the truth, but possibly not the most important truth about the fish. Other animals have scales. Possibly a more telling distinction about a fish is that it lives only in water.

When people describe the passive voice, they describe it in terms of the verb. Doing so is not wrong, just as it isn’t “wrong” to say that a fish has scales – but it misses the point entirely. Yes, voice is a matter of the form of the verb, but the form of the verb **follows from** the writer’s choice of subject. Discussing the matter by focusing on the verb is a disastrous fault in analysis, and it’s the primary reason for the chronic misunderstanding of voice. Do you want to emphasize *cows*, and let the reader know that who milked them is irrelevant? What **results** is a passive expression that omits the actor:

The cows were milked at dawn.

Do you need to emphasize who milked them? Then say so. Use the word as the subject of the sentence. What **results** is an active expression:

Kafka milked the cows at dawn.

Whether your sentence is active or passive should never be your first concern. Your first concern should be to emphasize the important word – and you’re the only one who knows what that word is. Let’s look at this idea in more detail now.

Use the passive voice when emphasis requires it

Your reader relies on you to emphasize the right word – to use that word as the subject of the sentence – and there is no game-playing allowed here. Your reader reads your words; he does not read your mind. And he assumes that whatever word you’ve used as the subject is the word you intend to stress.

Your intended emphasis dictates voice. If your intention is to emphasize the warthog, then you write, *The warthog was killed by the lion*. The expression ends up being passive. If your intention is to emphasize the lion, then you write, *The lion killed the warthog*. That one ends up being active. To ask which of those sentences is “better” is to ask a meaningless question. Both are perfect; both conform in every way to the conventions of the language. Both are examples of invisible style. They differ only in what they emphasize.

When we watch PBS on Sunday night, we see these words imposed on the screen: “*Nature*” is brought to you by a grant from Exxon-Mobil Corporation. What we do not see is *A grant from Exxon-Mobil Corporation brings you “Nature.”* We get the passive expression because the writer wishes to emphasize the name of the series; he does not wish to emphasize “grant.”

The signs on the perimeter of a high-security installation read *The use of deadly force is authorized*. They do not say *The Supreme Court of the United States has authorized security personnel of this facility to use deadly force*. We get the passive expression because what’s important to emphasize is the idea of deadly force. A side-benefit is that the passive expression fits on the sign.

Use the “imperfect” passive when the actor is understood or irrelevant

In the passive sentence, *The letter was postmarked on April 7*, who did the postmarking is not stated. It is not stated because it is irrelevant and therefore need not be mentioned.

The automated postmarking machine at the Rockville Post Office postmarked the letter on April 7 is an active expression, and it’s silly, isn’t it?

Consider the passive sentence, *Lunch will be served at noon*. Who is serving lunch is not stated. It is not stated because, in plain language, it doesn’t matter. In some cases, it might. But those cases would have to be highly unusual, as in *The Swedish Bikini Team will serve lunch at noon* or *Several members of Congress will serve lunch at noon*.

And consider the passive sentence, *The target was destroyed*. Please imagine that (1) you intend to emphasize “target,” (2) you’ve already told the reader what the target was, and (3) you’ve already said that an F-22 fired on the target. If context has already indicated the actor, then it would be unnecessarily repetitive to write, in the active voice, *The F-22 destroyed the target*. Insisting on using the active voice in this case would not only ruin emphasis; it would also flirt with being redundant.

Why does the passive voice have a bad reputation?

The passive has acquired a bad reputation because, in the hands of unskillful or deceitful writers, its use can be confusing and deceptive.

The unskillful writer writes, *If you are determined to have a disability, we will pay you as follows*. The reader chuckles at that one because it sounds as though someone is intent on having a disability. Another unskillful writer writes, *He was attacked by the lamp post in the parking lot*. Here, the reader wonders at the unusually aggressive behavior of the lamp post. A third unskillful writer writes, *Serious allegations have been raised regarding sexual harassment by Anita Hill*, and it sounds as though Ms. Hill was doing the harassing. These passive sentences embody errors in judgment, yes, but from these examples we must not generalize and say that all passives should be shot on sight.

The deceitful writer writes, *Mistakes were made*, or *The O-ring was not properly mounted*, or *It was decided to terminate the employee*. Now, there is nothing inherently underhanded about these sentences – **but if for any reason the reader needs to know who** made the mistakes, *who* failed to ensure that the O-ring had been properly mounted, or *who* decided to fire the employee, then the use of the passive voice is highly suspicious. Make no mistake: there are cowards among us, people who prefer to avoid accountability for their actions, and such people will always use the camouflage supplied by the passive voice. But this is not a matter of grammar; it is one of honor.

This is too confusing – what should I do?

Put the important word first and write a clear sentence.

It isn’t any more complicated than that. But you need to do both things. First, make sure that your subject is the word you intend to emphasize. You’re the writer; you control emphasis. And you’re responsible for it.

The **Court** received the brief on July 6.
The **brief** was received by the Court on July 6.

Active; emphasizes **Court**.
Passive; emphasizes **brief**

This **position** requires a top-secret clearance.
A top-secret **clearance** is required for this position.

Active; emphasizes **position**
Passive; emphasizes **clearance**

Deciding what word to use as the subject is your first job. Then you have to make sure that the sentence is clear. And here come two important qualifications: *it doesn't have to be clear to everyone, and it doesn't have to be clear in isolation*. It has to be clear to your intended readers, and it has to be clear in its context.

Make sure it's clear to your intended readers

When I visit organizations whose work is highly specialized, at least half of what I read goes right by me on the first reading. That's all right; it doesn't have to be clear to me if I'm not the reader that the writer was addressing. But if those same sentences and paragraphs perplex the intended audience, then we've got trouble.

Here are two passive sentences from the National Institutes of Health. The first sentence is fine. The second fails.

Cardiovascular infections are caused primarily by coagulase-positive and -negative staphylococci and other drug-resistant pathogens.

The disease is presented by most people in childhood, but in certain people symptoms may not be presented until adulthood.

The first sentence is addressed to specialists. It is relatively short. It uses no terms unfamiliar to the target readership. The writer wishes to emphasize "infections" and uses that word as the subject. What results is a passive construction and a perfectly emphatic sentence.

The second sentence is in a pamphlet addressed to the general public. The passive construction *The disease is presented* will not be immediately clear to this audience. And the problem here is the writer's choice of "presented." We can convert this sentence to the active voice and it remains confusing:

Most people present the disease in childhood, but in certain people symptoms do not present until adulthood.

Common sense argues that if we use mysterious words, then it really makes no difference whether we package those words in actives or passives. Here's what the writer is trying to convey. We can easily (and clearly) phrase it in either voice, but we need to use words the reader understands:

Active Voice: Signs of the disease usually appear in childhood. In some people, however, signs don't appear until adulthood.

Passive voice: Signs of the disease are usually seen in childhood. In some people, however, signs aren't seen until adulthood.

If it isn't clear on its own, make sure that context clarifies it

Ultimately, whether any sentence is clear or unclear depends largely on context.

Cattle must be inspected before you transport them across the state border.

Taken in isolation, that passive sentence is unclear. From that sentence alone, the reader can't know who is responsible for inspecting the cattle – and if you were a cattle-shipper, such a detail would matter to you.

Cattle must be inspected before you transport them across the state border. To arrange an inspection, performed at no cost to you by a state inspector, call 1-800-555-1133. Please make this call at least one week before you intend to transport the cattle.

There is the sentence in context. Suddenly, there is nothing wrong with it – and everything right with it if the writer wishes to emphasize “cattle.”

Be careful when using the imperfect passive

In *Cattle must be inspected*, there is no actor – in this instance, no inspector. Like *The letter was postmarked on April 7*, this is an example of the “imperfect passive.” It's also called the “divine” passive (not because there's anything particularly

divine about it, but because only the Divinity can know who did what).

Non-omniscient readers can't know, from this sentence in isolation, who whose job it is to inspect the cattle. You've just seen that context can clarify meaning. But when context does not, the reader is left with questions. When the reader is left with questions, the writer has not done his job.

The imperfect passive is the construction primarily responsible for the passive's reputation as the enemy of clarity, and you need to be careful when you use it. Let's consider a couple of examples.

The base will be closed next year.

We are speaking here of a military base; the point of the sentence is that it will be closed next year. By using the divine passive here, the writer is telling us that exactly who is responsible for closing it is unimportant, or that it is something we should be able to figure out without his help. Here's the idea in the active voice:

The Joint Chiefs of Staff have decided to close the base next year.

Is the active voice better? You're the writer. You decide. You decide what's important, what to emphasize, what to leave out. You decide when the sentence conveys the meaning you intend it to convey. One thing is certain: the active expression focuses the spotlight on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. If you're trying to say something about the base, then “base” should be your subject.

Trespassers will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law is an innocent example of the divine passive; readers are capable of figuring out who'll do the prosecuting. *Your application must be received by September 30* is innocent if the reader knows where he intends to send his application (he probably does). Remember, it's only when context fails to clarify the matter that the divine passive is a fault.

In gauging the clarity of any imperfect passive, remember what the reader already knows or naturally assumes

If in April I say to you, “I’m going to Paris in June,” I am holding you responsible for understanding two things left unsaid. I am holding you responsible for understanding that I’m talking about the Paris in France, and for

understanding that I mean June of this year. This is either good judgment or bad judgment on my part.

I think it is good judgment. I strongly suspect that your *default* for Paris is “France” and I know that your default for June is “June of this year.” You and I both agree that if I meant a different Paris, or a different June, then I would need to specify: *I’m going to Paris, Texas, in June 2011.*

When writers ignore the reader’s default understanding, what we get is unnecessary detail. Sometimes the result is silly redundancy:

He shrugged **his shoulders**.
They nodded **their heads in agreement**.

Sometimes the result is simply a needless expression:

The satellites remain in orbit **around the earth**.
She works for the **Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)**.

Always apply your sense of the reader’s default to the divine passive. If context does not clarify such a sentence as *Serious errors in judgment were committed*, then we cannot reasonably expect readers to know who committed the errors. There is no automatic understanding here; if the reader needs to know who committed the errors, the writer should say so. *The CFO made serious errors in judgment.*

But if we write *Your application must be notarized*, we can rely on the reader to infer who must notarize it. If we write *Coyotes have been spotted several times at Great Falls*, we can rely on the reader to understand that we intend to make a point about “coyotes,” and not about precisely who has seen them.

The important stuff has been said

The rest of this essay refines and amplifies some of the key issues already mentioned.

Why does everyone tell me to avoid the passive voice?

Probably the most common of logical fallacies is hasty generalization. A five-year-old boy is bitten by a dog and for the rest of his life believes that all dogs are vicious; a young woman whose lover betrays her declares that all men are faithless. But from the fact that some dogs are vicious, it does not follow that all are; from the fact that some men are faithless, it does not follow that all must be.

With experience, we learn when to generalize and when not to. It’s fair to say that if you put your hand into a fire, your hand will always be burned, but we recognize the ludicrous in, for example, *Germans are more intelligent than Italians*. Of the hand being burned by the fire, we would say

that it is fact; of the relative intelligence of all Germans and all Italians, we would say that it is opinion, and the opinion of a person without much experience of the world.

Now it's child's play to find examples of bad writing of all sorts, but we need to be careful in what we generalize about. *The state trooper scolded me for driving too fast loudly.* From the misplaced *loudly* in that sentence, should we generalize and say that no sentence can end with an adverb? *It is time to thoroughly become disgusted with half-baked thinking.* From the misplaced *thoroughly* in that sentence, should we generalize and claim that it's always wrong to split an infinitive? People do. People generalize, from meager and flimsy evidence. From such an expression as *Where is it at?* we get the indictment of any sentence ending in a preposition. (The real problem there is redundancy.) A second-grade English teacher with a forceful personality sees something like *I hate Freddie. Because he took my lunch.* – and she flies into a passion and insists that no sentence should ever, ever begin with “because.”

This is how the folklore starts; when folklore goes unchallenged, it becomes something of an unwritten rule. Surely, some passive constructions are awkward, and others are confusing, and others are silly. Exactly the same is true of some active expressions. Let's beware of generalizing too quickly.

It's human nature to look for a simple solution to a complex problem. And possibly there is no problem more complex than that of bad writing. Simple solutions are wonderful things; simplistic solutions, on the other hand, cause more harm than good. “Never use the passive voice” is a prime example of simplistic thought and belongs on a bumper sticker, not in reasoned debate. I hope I've already amply demonstrated this point.

What “prefer the active voice” means to a practical writer

The verb is the part of the sentence that (1) shows your reader how ideas relate and (2) moves those ideas along. When you write with vigorous verbs, reading requires less effort. Consider the following examples:

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| Weak verb: | They are of the opinion that the device should be replaced. |
| Strong verb: | They believe that the device should be replaced. |
| Weak verb: | Her remark is indicative of her bias. |
| Strong verb: | Her remark indicates her bias. |

Note that the precise verb says what each subject *does*, as opposed to what it *is*. And consider the two sentences below. Which would you rather read?

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|---|
| She made a visit to the prison and conducted an interview of the terrorist. |
| She visited the prison and interviewed the terrorist. |

All readers prefer the second version. In the second version, the verbs are precise, and precision leads directly to succinctness. Remember that, by definition, succinct means “requiring minimal effort to understand.”

Now, every once in a while you'll encounter situations where you can express your idea clearly and simply in either the passive or the active voice. In those situations, it's best to use the active voice (for the reasons just demonstrated).

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| Passive: | Your mail will be delivered before 2 p.m. |
| Active: | Your mail will arrive before 2 p.m. |

Passive: Two forms of photo identification are required.
Active: You must bring two forms of photo identification.

Can I shift from one voice to another in the same sentence?

Yes, you can. Nowhere in Dante's *Inferno* is there any punishment for doing so. In fact, there should be a place in the *Inferno* reserved for editors, managers, and English teachers who insist that such shifting is wrong. Just make sure that emphasis justifies the shift.

We are pleased to inform you that we are accepting your application.

There are two subject-verb combinations in that sentence. The first (*we are pleased*) is passive. The second (*we are accepting*) is active. Is there anything about that sentence that strikes you as wrong? As awkward, misleading, or unclear? There shouldn't be.

I have to use a PC while my Mac is being repaired.

Here, *I have* is active and *Mac is being repaired* is passive. And the sentence is perfectly fine. Certainly we could make both voices active:

I have to use a PC while CompUSA is repairing my Mac.

But does "CompUSA" matter? If you put it in the sentence, it had better, because the reader will think it does. That's one funny thing about readers; they expect every word in the sentence to be there for a reason. If "CompUSA" is irrelevant, what we have here is blown emphasis, where the writer's insistence on the active voice results in a misleading expression.

The Russian playwright Anton Chekhov once told a budding dramatist, "Never bring a cannon onstage unless you intend to fire it." The audience sees the cannon and believes that it's there for a reason. It didn't get there on its own; someone put it there on purpose. The audience expects that something is going to be done with it.

The wisdom in Chekhov's remark transcends the theatre. For our purposes, it would go like this: *Never bring a noun into a sentence unless you intend to make something of it.* And yet, when we needlessly bring "CompUSA" into the sentence – and then never mention it again – we've established expectations only to thwart them. Don't allow such artifice to enter your writing.

Final remarks

You now have the entire argument concerning the active and passive voice. It boils down to this: **In any sentence, "voice" follows from your choice of what word to use as the subject. Don't concern yourself with whether the voice is active or passive. Concern yourself with whether the sentence (1) emphasizes what you want it to emphasize and (2) is clear to your intended reader.**