



Simplifying Our Writing

Using Active Voice

BY JOHN HISKI RIDGE

This is the second in a series of articles about simplifying our writing. Here we address the use of the active voice. This begs the question, “Do we really need another article advocating active over passive voice?” Probably not. The information is out there, and in abundance. The problem isn’t a lack of available information; the problem is that we frequently don’t let the information affect our writing. We hear it, but we don’t apply it.

This article is a reminder to pay attention to voice when we’re editing our writing. Nothing more. But sometimes we need these reminders.

A Humorous Example

I’ve previously used this example because it illustrates quite well the need for active voice. Fans of Jack Nicholson will remember these lines from *A Few Good Men*:

Colonel Jessup: You want answers?

Lieutenant Kaffee: I think I’m entitled to them.

Jessup: You want answers?

Kaffee: I want the truth!

Jessup: You can’t handle the truth!

Who among us hasn’t daydreamed about using Jack’s legendary line in an advocacy setting? The dialogue thrills us because it’s

simple, and it’s simple because the writer used the active voice.

Now try to imagine the courtroom interchange if that line were in the passive voice:

Jessup: You want answers?

Kaffee: I want the truth!

Jessup: The truth can’t be handled by you!

We have to think a little harder about what Colonel Jessup is trying to say. As a result, the whole dialogue loses its impact.

Applying the Active Voice

When we use the active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action. Here’s an example:

Example 1. *The taxpayer* [subject/actor] *rejected* [verb/action] *the settlement offer*.

In this instance, the taxpayer is the subject of the sentence. This same person is also the individual who performed the action: rejecting the settlement offer.

We can identify the active voice by its form: when the active voice is used, the subject performing the action generally precedes the verb. This is illustrated below:

Example 2. *The highway department* [subject/actor] *replanted* [verb] *the dead trees in the living snow fence*.

These examples seem simple precisely because they are. The active voice makes our writing simpler, easier to understand, and shorter.

Correcting the Passive Voice

The passive voice complicates things. Rather than performing an action, the subject of the sentence is the recipient of the action. For example,

Example 3. *The settlement offer* [subject] *was rejected* [verb] *by the taxpayer* [actor].

This sentence could have easily been rewritten in the active voice, as in Example 1 above. Here’s another example of the use of the passive voice:

Example 4. *A fee simple interest* [subject] *was conveyed* [verb] *by Mr. Jones* [actor] *to Mr. and Mrs. Smith*.

This sentence could be simplified to read as follows:

Example 5. *Mr. Jones* [subject/actor] *conveyed* [verb] *a fee simple interest to Mr. and Mrs. Smith*.

Sentences that use the active voice are generally shorter, tighter, and more readable. As a result, most grammarians suggest using the active voice whenever possible.

Like the active voice, the passive voice can be identified by its form. It's made up of a variation of the verb "to be" (*am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been*) and a past participle. As a general rule, past participles are verbs ending in *-ed, -en, -t, or -n* (*awakened, broken, lost, worn*).¹ A quick glance shows that the passive voice verbs used in the examples lengthen and complicate our writing.

When to Use the Active and Passive Voices

The active voice is more direct than the passive voice. Sentences that use the active voice are generally shorter, tighter, and more readable. As a result, most grammarians suggest using the active voice whenever possible.

But there are a few instances when passive voice is preferred.

The first is when the writer wants to emphasize the action in a sentence. In the following example, the emphasis is on the rejection of the settlement offer and not on the actor (opposing counsel):

Example 6. *The settlement offer was rejected by opposing counsel.*

The second is when the writer is unaware of the actor. In the following example, the actor (a shooter) is not included:

Example 7. *The victim was shot with a 9mm handgun.*

The third is when the writer wants to de-emphasize the actor or avoid assigning responsibility for the action. In this example, it is unclear who robbed the bank:

Example 8. *The bank was robbed at noon on Monday.*

Conclusion

As I'm learning to improve my writing, I try to follow the fundamental rule that all tools in a writer's toolbox have value, and all tools will be needed at some time. Use of the active voice simplifies our writing, and overuse of the passive voice can make our writing longwinded, boring, and confusing. But both voices have their time and place. If we work hard to write in the active voice, and only use the passive voice when it's truly called for, our writing will be simpler and more persuasive. ^{CL}



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NOTE

1. Gambrell et al., *Help Your Kids With Language Arts* 46, 54 (Dorling Kindersley 2013). This work contains a simple yet excellent discussion of past participles and the form of the passive voice.

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