

Active voice

Big Brother is watching you. *George Orwell*

They paved paradise and put up a parking lot. *Joni Mitchell*

I shot the sheriff. *Bob Marley*

Our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation. *Abraham Lincoln*

Passive voice

You are being watched by Big Brother

Paradise was paved and a parking lot put up.

The sheriff was shot by me.

A new nation was brought forth on this continent by our fathers.

On writing in the active voice

By Jean Colley
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Why write in the active voice? When you write in the active voice, you write more clearly and more vigorously than you do in the passive voice. The quotes above are memorable in part because they are in the active voice. The active voice is perfectly appropriate for business reports, memos and letters as well as speeches and songs.

What is the active voice? It's a form of sentence construction. In the most basic sentence, active-voice construction is: subject – verb – direct object. The subject “acts” on a direct object. Put another way, in the active voice you identify an “actor” (for instance, a person or organization) and what the action is.

What is the passive voice? In the passive voice, the subject is acted upon. Typically, the passive voice uses a verb phrase of the verb *to be** plus *by*. Many writers, however, drop the “by” in the passive voice—so the reader does not know for sure who or what the actor is. These are examples: Seniors are covered . . . Medicines are distributed . . . Prices were increased . . . Candles are being lit . . . Songs were sung . . . You can mentally insert “by” to double check that these sentences are in the passive voice. “Medicines are distributed by the United Nations.” “Prices were increased by the health care insurers.”

Should I try always to write in the active voice? No. You may have good reasons to highlight the object of the sentence and to de-emphasize the actor. For example, you may want to avoid assigning credit or blame. But think hard about writing sentences like this: Mistakes were made. Although it may be a little scary to point out the person or organization responsible, obscuring the actor may not really serve your purposes, either.

Nonetheless, too much of anything—even the active voice—becomes boring. You can certainly use the passive voice to vary the cadence or rhythm of a paragraph. Overall, though, you serve your readers better with the active voice, because it is clearer.

How can I unleash my active voice? Once you become adept at recognizing the passive voice, it's pretty easy to convert a sentence to the active voice. Here's how to recognize and convert:

- First, look for a verb phrase containing a form of the verb *to be** plus the word *by*. If the actual word *by* isn't present, try to mentally insert it. "Seniors *are* covered." . . . "Seniors are covered *by* . . ."
- Second, identify the verb before *by*. In our example, that verb is "covered." A form of "covered" will become the active verb in the new sentence.
- Third, ask "covered *by what?* or covered *by whom?*" In this example, the answer is Medicare. Medicare becomes the subject of the new sentence in the active voice: Medicare covers seniors.

This exercise will seem tedious at first, but it gets much easier with practice.

Wouldn't it be easier to learn by example? For many people, yes. To help you learn to convert from passive to active, I offer the following examples from work I've edited over the last year. The examples range from simple to complex.

Passive—A decision was made by the committee to proceed.

Active—The committee made a decision to proceed.

You could have also written: The committee decided to proceed. A little tighter, a little more to the point.

Passive—In this multi-center clinical study, 38 highly symptomatic patients with drug-refractory gastroparesis were enrolled by the researchers.

The person who wrote this sentence might argue that the emphasis should be on the patients.

I think most readers will find the active voice (just below) easier to understand.

Active—In this multi-center clinical study, researchers enrolled 38 highly symptomatic patients with drug-refractory gastroparesis.

Passive—The vomiting and nausea frequency as well as the gastric emptying were measured at 3, 6, and 12 months after permanent implantation of the percutaneous electrodes.

Active—After permanently implanting the percutaneous electrodes, we measured vomiting and nausea frequency as well as gastric emptying at 3, 6, and 12 months.

Passive—Significant thought has been given to life-sustaining treatment, and patient preferences have been communicated to his/her physician and/or health care providers.

Active—The patient has given significant thought to life-sustaining treatment and has communicated her preferences to her physician and other health care providers.

Passive—Any section not completed indicates full treatment for that section.

Active—If the physician does not complete a section, she will provide full treatment for that section.

In the previous two examples, the passive-voice originals are so unclear that the active-voice conversions may or may not convey what the writer actually had in mind.

Passive—Additional funding can be identified through reductions in other government spending, increased Medicare taxes and in continuous improvement of care delivery processes. Similar adjustments must be made on the state level to provide access to better basic health care services for the disadvantaged.

Active--Congress could free up additional funding by reducing other government spending,

increasing Medicare taxes and promoting continuous improvement of care delivery processes. Lawmakers at the state level must make similar adjustments to provide access to better basic health care services for the disadvantaged.

Passive—Completion of this process by the nurse will allow him to have greater success and stability in the new role.

This sentence is tricky. Before converting to the active voice, I had to try to figure out what the writer had in mind. I first edited it this way: “This process, completed by the nurse, will allow him to have greater success and stability in the new role.” Not a very good sentence, but I was honing in on the nurse and completing a process. Then, I converted to the active voice (with a few additional tweaks).

Active—Once the nurse completes this process, he’ll be more successful and more stable in his new role.

In intermediate edit, note how I’ve transformed the noun “completion” into the verb “completed.” As you edit your own work, look for verbs hiding in nouns ending in tion, ion, ance, ment, ent, iency and ility and try to convert them to verbs. Intention: intend.

Resistance: resist. Discernment: discern.

Passive—These planning steps will need to be adjusted to reflect many of the decisions that are necessary for employers to make in order to address specific organizational and regulatory requirements that are likely to apply in your situation and jurisdiction.

Active—Employers will need to adjust these planning steps to reflect organizational and regulatory requirements that apply specifically to them.

Passive—Community-wide application of preventive interventions is likely to be necessary to reduce and stabilize the growing burden of chronic disease and conditions that affect the citizens of the U.S. as well as the manner in which people use, abuse, misuse or under-use health care services.

Here I’m using Track Changes in Word to demonstrate the process. First I edited this sentence to figure out what the writer was saying: Community-wide preventive interventions may be needed to reduce or stabilize the growing burden of chronic disease affecting Americans and to influence how people use health care services.

The sentence, still in the passive voice, now reads: Community-wide preventive interventions may be needed to reduce or stabilize the growing burden of chronic disease affecting Americans and to influence how people use (or abuse) health care services.

Active—We [or somebody] may need community-wide preventive interventions to reduce or stabilize the growing burden of chronic diseases affecting Americans and to influence how people use (or abuse) health care services.

This example illustrates the problem with the passive voice—we don’t know who the actor is. And with something as big as a community-wide preventive intervention, that’s something we need to know. In addition, the term “preventive intervention,” is pretty vague. The writer would have served us better by giving an example.

Passive—Shifting the paradigm of thinking about the current health care system is necessary.

Active—Policymakers [or somebody] need to think differently about the health care system.

Paradigm shifting has been much in vogue for some time, but I'm not convinced most people know what the phrase means. Use verbs – and nouns – that mean something specific.

Are all sentence constructions either passive voice or active voice? No. Some active-voice verbs cannot be converted to passive voice and others have no active-voice equivalent. Fowler** supplies these examples: She combed her hair. (Her hair was combed by her sounds tangled.) The creek was reputed to contain blackfish (The creek reputes to contain blackfish sounds fishy.) You can also write any number of perfectly acceptable “intermediate” types of sentences. Fowler discusses them in detail.

One last example. Winston Churchill said this to the House of Commons on June 4, 1940: “. . . We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender. . . .” He didn't say: “Engagement will take place on the beaches, action will be seen on the landing grounds, in the fields and on the streets . . . Giving up is not an option now or in the future. . . .”

* Forms of the verb *to be* (the most irregular in the English language!): am, are, is, was, were, be, been being.

** Burchfield, R. W. *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage* Third Edition Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. Look under “passive territory.”

Jean Colley, 3121 East Madison, Suite 204, Seattle, WA 98112, (206) 448-1772 or jcolley@ccom.net.