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Using the Active Voice to Strengthen Your Writing

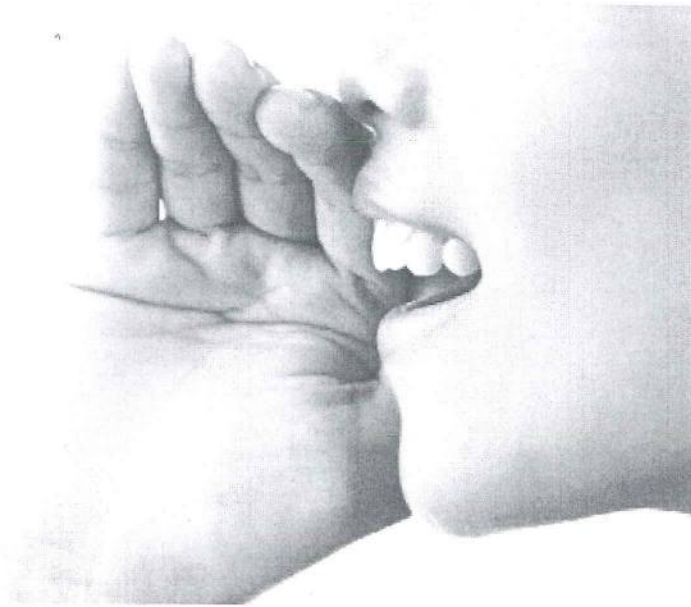
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Writing in the active voice means constructing sentences where the subject “acts”:

- I threw the ball.
- You are making too much noise.
- Ben will eat popcorn and watch a movie tomorrow evening.

In each of these sentences, the subject (I, You and Ben respectively) performs the action of the verb (threw, making, will watch). **The sentences are punchy, direct and make it clear who’s doing what.**

Writing in the passive voice means constructing sentences where the subject is “passive” – acted upon, rather than agents of action. For many forms of writing, this can create an undesired effect: sentences often become confusing or simply dull.

- The ball was thrown by me.
- Too much noise is being made by you.
- Tomorrow evening, popcorn will be eaten and a movie will be watched by Ben.

In each of these sentences, the subject (“the ball”, “too much noise”, “popcorn” and “a movie”) is being acted upon by the verb. With sentences written in this way, we can even eliminate the agent who is performing this action:

- The ball was thrown.
- Too much noise is being made.
- Tomorrow evening, popcorn will be eaten and a movie will be watched.

These are all perfectly correct sentences, but the reader has the sense that something is missing. Who threw the ball? Who or what is making too much noise? And surely someone’s going to watch that movie and eat that popcorn?

Why is the Active Voice So Important?

If you’ve ever had a go at creative writing, you’ll probably have come across the advice to always write in the active voice. This is a good rule of thumb for most pieces of fiction: **sentences in the active voice have energy and directness, both of which will keep your reader turning the pages!**

Sentences written in the active voice are also less wordy than those in the passive voice – and cutting unnecessary words always improves a piece of writing, whether it's fiction or non-fiction.

Students writing academic essays can sometimes tie themselves in knots trying to make sentences sound “formal” – which often (mistakenly) is taken to mean putting a sentence in the passive voice. Here's an example (thanks to the UVic Writers' Guide):

- “The theme that was most dealt with by the 16th Century poets was . . .”

This could be rewritten in the active voice as:

- “The 16th Century poets most often dealt with the theme of . . .”

This sentence is shorter, to the point, and the reader is less likely to switch off half-way through. It is just as “formal” and academically correct as the first one, but makes for a better piece of writing by being snappier.

How to Get Starting Using the Active Voice

Take a piece of writing that you've produced, and go through working out if each sentence is in the active or the passive voice. One clue to look out for when searching for sentences in the passive voice is the use of “was”:

- “The theme that was most dealt with by the 16th Century poets . . .”
- “His death was regretted.”

(Though note not all sentences using “was” are passive: “*I was riding my bike*” is active, “*My bike was being ridden by me*” is passive.)

Another clue is the use of “by” when referring to who did something:

- “The report was written by me.”
- “All of the mistakes were made by him.”

Once you've identified the passive sentences in your work, try rewriting each in the active voice. Do you think it makes a difference? If you've changed a lot of the sentences, read the whole piece through from start to finish – has the overall feel or tone changed? Take a word count of the original and the new version: how many words have you been able to cut?

If you get stuck, pop into the Daily Writing Tips forums and post the paragraph or sentences that you're struggling with!

Tips and Tricks for Using the Active Voice

Use the active voice when you want your writing to be simple, direct, clear and easy to read. If you're not very confident about your writing, using the active voice can be an easy way to improve a dull or lifeless piece of prose.

However, don't make the mistake of thinking that you always need to use the active voice. Sometimes, it's perfectly appropriate to phrase a sentence in the passive voice: just be aware that you're doing this, and make sure you know why.

For example, **using the passive voice can be an excellent way to avoid assigning responsibility for a job or problem.** Sometimes this can be a useful and tactful way to phrase things in business writing:

“Mistakes were made.”

“The files will be sent as soon as possible.”

“All our records have been lost.”

In *Elements of Style* <http://www.bartleby.com/141/strunk5.html>, Strunk gives the rule “Use the active voice” but admits that:

This rule does not, of course, mean that the writer should entirely discard the passive voice, which is frequently convenient and sometimes necessary.

- The dramatists of the Restoration are little esteemed to-day.
- Modern readers have little esteem for the dramatists of the Restoration.

The first would be the right form in a paragraph on the dramatists of the Restoration; the second, in a paragraph on the tastes of modern readers. The need of making a particular word the subject of the sentence will often, as in these examples, determine which voice is to be used.

At school and university, many people are taught not to use “I” in scientific or academic writing. (Modern stylistic advice does not generally prohibit using “I” in this way, but it’s a good idea to check your institution’s guidelines.) Using the passive voice does allow you to avoid the agent performing the action, for example:

- “I performed an experiment to test the rate of the reaction.” (*active*)

can be rewritten as:

- “An experiment was performed to test the rate of the reaction.” (*passive*).

In general, though, make sure the majority of your sentences are in the **active voice**: your writing will be livelier and more engaging, encouraging your readers to keep going.

Further Reading on the Active Voice

- [Strunk’s Elements of Style](#)
- [Wikipedia article on the Active Voice](#)
- [Ask Oxford Plain English Guidelines](#)

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