
Viewpoints

The passive voice revisited

One's choice of grammatical voice – in English, between only two: active or passive – is an issue for writers and editors. Most, I trust, have relinquished the opinion that scientific findings must be presented [passive voice] in the passive voice. Why not be clearer and more concise by writing: Scientific findings no longer require the passive voice; they demand the active. The house style of the *BMJ* (British Medical Journal; <http://resources.bmj.com/bmj/authors/bmj-house-style>) is explicit: “Write in the active and use the first person [We/I] where necessary.”

A decade ago, biologist Rupert Sheldrake made an inquiry into the preferences of journals in the biological and physical sciences; he discovered that of 55 such journals, only two required the passive (*New Scientist*, 21 July 2001).

Can you find the passive voice used even in the Methods sections of *Nature Medicine*? Or, similarly, anywhere in *Scientific American*? Space in all established journals is limited; submissions are many. Switching most of the passive verbs for active ones will shrink an article considerably – not to mention making it clearer, especially to readers for whom English is a second language.

Many of us who teach or author-edit for writers with English as their second or third language observe, in general, their initial preference for the passive voice. My students and clients in Finland attribute this to their reading in the older literature, not recognizing the space-and-money-saving evolution in style. They used to bring me handbooks like Paul Leedy's 1988 edition of *Practical Research, Planning and Design*, which stated that any “intrusion of the researcher”, such as by first-person pronouns, “is particularly taboo”. Before then, I never consciously met the future passive, nor had ever produced one before meeting Leedy's recommended “The test will have been given before the students are permitted to read the novel.” These two constructions by themselves consume eight words, and four verb forms in a row offer a challenge either to read or create. Why not say “After the test/After taking the test, the students can read/will have permission to read the novel”? Something occurring after a test implies that the test has ended.

What is the passive voice?

At this point I should perhaps descend from my soap box and clarify what voice is. I am no grammarian and shy away from terminology ranging from “conjunctive adverb” up to the “pseudo-cleft sentence”. Most of us perhaps fail to recognize the passive or active voice.

First, let us establish that nothing called “passive tense” exists. English has several tenses, but only two voices. I think of the voices, metaphorically, like musical major and minor keys. I view the passive as minor, and active voice as major. Both are useful, one for the heavy lifting, to mix metaphors.

Passive voice, in its most recognizable form, involves two or more verbs. Yet “These species have appeared in the liver” is active; the passive is “These have been found in the liver.” Even guidebooks on writing include, as an example of the passive voice, “These have come from Sigma”, whereas an actual passive construction for this would be “These have been ordered from Sigma” because, as a test, one can insert a “by” plus an agent (“by us”) in the latter, but not in the former. Why not substitute the so-useful inanimate agent, instead: “The/Their source/supplier was/is Sigma.”

Some label as “passive verbs” verbs in either the passive or the active voice (usually to be, to have, to get, and such) that appear boringly often. For these, I use the term “first-draft verbs”—or “dull” or “overused verbs”.

Depending on the grammatical nomenclature, even the construction “there” plus a form of “to be” can earn the label passive, but more correctly, the there + to be structure occurs in what is called an “existential sentence” (see guides from Strunk and White to Michael McCarthy's 2006 *Cambridge Grammar of English*). I often refer to this as a conversational form – this “There is/was” space-filler. This existential structure to open a sentence does, however, allow us to end with the vital information: to create end-focus. In processing a first draft I always omit it.

“There were no differences in clotting” might change to “No differences occurred in clotting,” with a strong negative at the beginning and the same vital information at the end; or even “In clotting, no differences occurred.”

To lighten up the dull, dull topic of grammar – in his book *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, Stephen King attacks the passive, saying that the passive voice is like a passive lover. Here in Finland, a colleague quoted this line from King, and a lively young Spanish woman studying biomedicine asked, “What is a passive lover?” As the teacher struggled to formulate a reply, a Finnish woman whispered something to the Spaniard, who cheerfully responded, “Oh, we don't have any of those in SPAIN!”

My approach

On the first day of class I ask the doctors to imagine themselves in the role of a journal editor. Their forthcoming issue must soon go to press, with 16 pages to fill. The three top articles on the short list, all equally excellent, would fill 8, 8, and 16 pages long. What is their choice? The immediate and overwhelming vote – coming in almost a shout from Reykjavik to Malta – has been “8 and 8!” So?

My next question is how to shrink that 16-pager. Most of the participants on my current writing course now suggest one method: change the passive to active voice. Many other tricks help in shrinking texts – for instance, banning wordy phrases (“in reference to,” “as a matter of fact”; these are listed in most writing guides) and avoiding a repeated “in this study.” Here, let us concentrate on voice.

My students' articles earn praise for concise, clear language from editors, reviewers, and their opponents at public PhD thesis defences. These people, not high school English teachers, are the judges who matter, as Ed Hull points out.

The inanimate agent

Back in 1988 Paul Leedy demanded the passive voice for scientific writing, he warned that “the researcher . . . should be anonymous. . . All of the action within the drama of research revolves around the data; they, and they only, speak.” This brilliantly constructed sentence is invaluable in class as an example of active voice made possible by its two inanimate agents: “action” and “data”. How, I wondered two decades ago and still wonder today, can anyone – in arguing for the passive voice – create such powerful active-voice, inanimate-agent line? And then he continues, dropping into the passive: “The passive voice . . . is used to indicate” rather than “The passive voice indicates”. “Table 3 shows”, “results indicate” are phrases we all use, but to make action revolve and data speak is truly impressive.

In later editions of his manual Leedy may have altered some prescriptions; in 1988 he provided as possibilities: “a survey was made of” something vs “The researcher made a survey of” something. In my online medical writing manual, developed since 1986 (www.helsinki.fi/kksc/language.services/AcadWrit.pdf), I comment that because any survey, once made, provides results, why not write “Our/the survey of X showed that Y” – with the inanimate agent “survey”? Beware that such agents cannot decide or

determine, but hypotheses can indeed predict.

Logic will trump any justification for most passives, except when they are hidden away in the middle of Methods sections. (“These cells were collected, spun down, plated, and chilled; they provided sufficient X.”)

Some passive constructions that writing manuals consider irreplaceable are easy to transform into the active with inanimate agent, or by converting the verb into an adjective (“are needed” becomes “are necessary”). Some grammarians lump together inanimate-agent forms with other passive-voice forms. Quirk and Greenbaum’s *University Grammar of English* recommends “The bottle contained . . . liquid” and “The will benefited . . . two brothers.” Another guide calls the sentence “X necessitated Y” passive. A “passive clause” of course exists, but “a passive sentence” puzzles me. One sentence can include both passive-voice and active-voice verbs. “The liquid was poured into the tubes until they were full” has both. (“The liquid that was added filled the tubes”?)

Why, besides making articles shorter so that more can fit into each journal issue, prefer the active voice? For several reasons: because the non-native English-speaking community can more easily understand sentences in the active voice, and can also feel liberated from the past and learn to utilize the active. And because when seeking data, one’s readers will more likely remain awake.

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Examples of going active

Passive	Active
More colloids are needed.	More colloids are necessary/vital.
A slight increase was observed.	A slight increase was observable.
There were no differences in clotting.	No differences appeared in clotting.
Untreated mice were used as controls.	Untreated mice served as controls.
In the same operation, Y was performed.	The same operation included/involved Y.
In X, a Y probe was used on the animals.	Animals underwent X with a Y probe.
Per visual field, six stained cells were found.	Six cells were present/evident/visible per visual field.
This effect has been shown in X.	This effect has been evident/apparent in X.
The first expression was then found.	The first expression then appeared/emerged.
X was observed in cells.	X was apparent in/occurred in cells.
Results suggesting the opposite have been presented.	Some results suggest the opposite.
Cells were compared using lasers.	Lasers allowed comparison of cells.
X correlated with Y, but no correlation between A and B was found.	X correlated with Y, but A did not correlate with B.
There was no decrease in X.	X did not decrease.
There is extensive evidence that ...	Evidence is extensive that ...