

Welcome to The Writing Company. Today's topic: "The Great Debate: Whether to Use Active or Passive Voice; That Is the Question."

Stroll into any bookstore and browse through the business writing section. You'll find slim books, fat books, workbooks, and those heavy grammar books you can use for door stops. Look up "active/passive" voice. I'll bet you'll find this advice:

"Always use the active voice in business writing. It is easier to read and takes fewer words."

For the most part, this is true. Active voice is easier to read and in many instances uses fewer words. But "always" be wary of "always" dictums. Writing is more complicated than following a set of absolute rules—and this is especially true for using active and passive voice.

Both active and passive voice have their place in the world. You just need to know when to use them—and use them appropriately. And here's where the "Great Debate" begins.

For those impatiently waiting for a definition of what exactly active and passive voice is, let me give you a few examples.

Number one: Active voice focuses on who does what.
Passive voice focuses on what is done.

Here's another way to think of this: When babes learn English at an early age, they learn to speak in active voice. The English sentence often—but not always—

Puts the subject first
Followed by a verb
And sometimes includes an object.

So we have a *subject/verb/object* arrangement. Visualize the sentence order:

subject + verb + object. This sentence order sounds natural to us because we learn it early on.

Here's an active voice sentence:

Dad feeds the dog.

Dad is the subject/ *feeds* is the verb/ *dog* is the object. Got it?
Subject/verb/object.

Remember that active voice emphasizes *Who does What*.

Dad (who) is the actor

Feeds is the action

Dog (what) is the receiver of the action.

So active voice reads like this: **actor + action + receiver**

Now, let's change this sentence to passive voice.

The dog is fed by dad.

Who is the actor?

Many of my students say the dog is the actor because Fido the dog is in the subject position, where we typically find actors. But how can Fido feed himself? Imagine Fido climbing up into the pantry, finding his Alpo and opening it? Ridiculous, you say.

The *dog* is the subject of the sentence but also the receiver of the action.

Is fed becomes the verb

And our actor, *dad*, is now the object of the sentence.

So passive voice reads like this: **receiver + passive verb + actor**.

Confusing? Yes. We expect "Dad" the actor to be in the subject position, but now he is relegated to the object position—and this is why passive voice is not intuitively understood, especially for English speakers.

So as readers, passive voice makes us do a double-take. We have to figure out who does what, when the actor is the object and not the subject of the sentence.

Passive voice also uses a “passive verb”—the *to be* verb form; hence the name. “To be” verbs include “is/are/was/were—anything with the “be” form. *He is handsome. She was once a queen. Forests are beautiful, etc.*

Passive voice replaces action verbs like feed. And oftentimes passive voice has no actors. And that’s why passive voice gets a bad rep: Consider these examples:

- Rivers were polluted.
- Taxes were raised.
- Forests were felled.

In each example the “to be” verb is used: “were.” But also no actors are involved. Who polluted the rivers, who raised the taxes, and who felled the forests?

In passive voice the actor is hidden—obscured—in a sleight-of-hand grammatical trick. No one is responsible.

If we recast the sentences in active voice, we now know who did what:

- Truman Company polluted the rivers.
- Congress raised taxes.
- Paul Bunyan felled the forest.

Because much of government writing uses passive voice and no one is named, we become suspicious of who did what—who is accountable. If bad things happen—like polluted rivers—and no one is accountable, we question the motives of the action.

But let me pay due to passive voice. It has its purposes, especially when the actor is unimportant or not known.

Here are a few examples of when passive voice is appropriate:

- When stating a general belief:
 - Aspirin is believed to reduce heart attacks. (“is believed” is the passive verb)
 - The world is round.
- When the actor is unimportant:

- Safety checks must be conducted before each flight.
- When the actor is unknown.
 - My checkbook was stolen last week.
- When the actor should not be named:
 - Several errors were made in the budget. (Do we really want to single out John for his poor math?)
- When focusing on results:
 - My back account is overdrawn. (How did that happen? I wrote too many checks! Active voice.)

But passive voice also has its pitfalls, especially when actors must be named. As an example. Some time back, I was helping government contract negotiators write a set of guidelines. While revising the guidelines, I came across this statement:

- If the contractor has received clearance within 24 months before the awarded contract, there must be a copy of this clearance in the file.
 - **Question: Who does what? Who puts the copy into the file?**

Let's anticipate a worst-case scenario. The contract goes awry. The auditors review the files but find no clearance among the documents. Who is responsible for the clearance? It doesn't say. The contract goes to litigation, the negotiator loses his job, then his house, finally his wife leaves with the kids and dog for Pittsburg—all because of passive voice.

Extreme, you say. Well, don't take a chance. Know whether to use active or passive voice, given the circumstance.

Let me close with a quote—rephrased of course—from the Great Bard: “Whether to use *exist* or *not to be alive*,” that is the question.

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