

## SHOULD I TEACH MY STUDENTS NOT TO WRITE IN PASSIVE VOICE?

BY ANNE ENQUIST

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*Writers' Toolbox ... is a regular feature of Perspectives. In each issue, Anne Enquist will offer suggestions on how to teach specific writing skills, either in writing conferences or in class. Her articles will share tools and techniques used by writing specialists working with diverse audiences, such as J.D. students, ESL students, and practitioners. Readers are invited to contact Professor Enquist at ame@seattleu.edu.*

Years ago I heard an English professor from one of the Washington state universities refer to the “much maligned passive voice.” I tend to agree with his sentiments. Passive voice has gotten an undeserved bad rap.

When I work with law students on their writing, I frequently see evidence of this. Law students, sometimes even quoting their legal writing or undergraduate professors, tell me that they want me to “check their writing for passive voice,” much like a dentist would check a patient for cavities, I suppose. The premise underlying this request seems to be that passive voice, like a dental cavity, is a “bad thing” that must be detected and eradicated.

I'm not sure where the “passive voice=bad” and “active voice=good” impression developed, but in my view it misrepresents a much more nuanced and interesting aspect of language. So, when students ask me to check for passive voice, I start by doing several things. First, I ask them if they'd

like me to review with them what passive voice is exactly, just to be sure we are on the same page.

Inevitably they say “sure” and we can move to a quick refresher with no one being embarrassed about not knowing something basic. I start by explaining that many people confuse passive voice with past tense, but that the two are entirely different. Past tense refers to the time in which an action happened (the past, obviously), whereas passive voice refers to the relationship between the subject and verb of the sentence. (At this point I sometimes detect a slight, barely perceptible shifting of weight as the student moves in his or her seat. This nervous gesture confirms my suspicion that the quick “refresher” is not really a refresher for this student, and he or she may be hearing this information for the first time.)<sup>1</sup>

I then move to some examples, which I label as “basic” just to get us started. I often begin with the student's own name and add a verb and object.

*Example: Joe wrote the brief.*

The student readily sees that the sentence is in past tense (“wrote” as opposed to the present tense “writes”), and then I explain that although the verb is in the past tense, this is an active voice sentence because of the relationship between the subject (“Joe”) and the verb (“wrote”). The subject is *actively* doing the verb; hence the term, “active voice.” This relationship is easily symbolized by drawing an arrow between “Joe” and “wrote.”

*Active voice: Joe → wrote the brief.*  
*subject verb*

Then I add the passive voice version of the same sentence, noting that now the subject of the sentence is “brief” and the verb is “was written”:

*Passive voice: The brief ← was written by Joe.*  
*subject verb*

The key here is for the student to see that the arrow now goes the other way. The brief is not doing the writing; the writing is *being done to* the brief. The subject of the sentence (“brief”) is now “passive,” that is, it is not the doer of the action. The doer of the action is still “Joe,” who has moved

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, of course, students are up to speed on what passive voice is so we can move quickly to how to use it effectively.

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then deciding if the active/passive choice was the right one.<sup>4</sup>

My hope is that students will find their brief journey into the world of active and passive voice<sup>5</sup> a bit more pleasant and interesting than a visit to the dentist's office. In any case, I want them to come away realizing that unlike dental cavities, passive voice can sometimes be a good thing. As law students who aspire to be effective users of language, they need passive voice, as well as active voice, as a tool in their writing belt. The trick, as always, is to know which tool to use when.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, two of the three sentences in the opening paragraph of this column are written in active voice and one is in passive voice. Sentence 1: "I heard ..." active voice; sentence 2: "I agree ..." active voice; and sentence 3: "Passive voice has gotten ..." passive voice (no irony there). The doer of the action in the third sentence—whoever it was that gave passive voice a bad rap—is both unknown and relatively unimportant. At this point in the discussion, the emphasis has shifted to passive voice itself, so it is appropriately moved to the subject position in the sentence.

<sup>5</sup> Essentially the same approach can be used with a class followed by a class discussion of active and passive voice sentences in a sample piece of writing.

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