



ON USING THE PASSIVE VOICE

"Mistakes were made."

This is, in a nutshell, the peril and promise of the passive voice. When Ronald Reagan went on the airwaves to announce this conclusion to the Tower report on the Iran-Contra scandal, this statement was the closest he came to an admission of responsibility for his administration. But how responsible is it? What mistakes? Most importantly, who made them?

The passive voice is a mode of phrasing sentences to exclude the active subject, replacing it instead with the object of the sentence's action. In this case, the person or persons making the mistakes are unnamed, as far as this sentence is concerned. The passive voice has its uses. Sometimes the focus of the sentence really *is* on the sentence object, rather than on the acting subject:

Melanogaster larva were found to mature at 25% higher rates on the sucrose/fructose mix than on the pure sucrose. (Here you might simply want to use the active-voice "matured.")

No matter whether the user is left or right, the rhetorics of identity politics are always found instrumental in the short term and corrosive in the long term.

Shaw's plays, surprisingly, have been performed and vigorously promoted throughout Southeast Asia these last twenty years, to increasingly enthusiastic responses.

Too often, however, users of the passive voice intend to evade a reader's active imagination, as Reagan does in the first example. The disembodied results are sometimes exasperating, often silly:

Margot's performance was seen to be less than adequate. (By whom?)

Edmund Spenser has been known to write in nine-line stanzas. (Who has known this?)

The high curveball was arced toward Bonilla. (Who threw it?)

Using the word "by," you can usually reintroduce an agent, but the sentence is still in the passive-voice—and usually excruciatingly awkward:

The high curveball was arced *by* Dwight Gooden toward Bonilla.

Depending on your emphasis—the curveball and the batter, or the pitcher—the active-voice alternatives are clearer and stronger:

The high curveball arced toward Bonilla. ("ball" is the active subject)

Dwight Gooden arced a high curveball toward Bonilla. ("pitcher" is active)

Sometimes, the passive is simply unilluminating. Compare the first passage, written in the passive voice, with the subsequent, more active one:

Edmund Spenser has been thought to be England's first and greatest epic poet. In the minds of seventeenth-century critics, Milton foremost among them, Spenser was England's great original epic poet. But Milton's own example suggested a greater scope for epic and a deeper knowledge of its classical roots and manners, to the point where I today find it hard to square *The Faerie Queene* with works like *Paradise Lost*, or *The Aeneid*, or even Wordsworth's *Prelude*.

The inclusion of Milton's critical evaluation points in an active direction for the paragraph and its author, while the subsequent sentence makes the most of it. The vagueness of the passive voice in the first version, meanwhile, leaves the writer stranded—thinking about greatness in a void. If nobody's doing anything, what is there to talk about?

Academic writing, unfortunately, often tempts us to use the passive voice. Most of us were schooled not to use "I" in essays, when it is actually called for:

Legislation has been understood to be derived from the will of the Executive branch.

This statement is "neutral"; it has no clear point to put forward, no argument to develop. Compare it to the following statement in which the writer begins to articulate a perspective and an interpretation.

I understand legislation to derive more from the will of the Executive branch than from the consensus of the Legislative, which troubles me.

The passive voice can be a cowardly way out of venturing an opinion or taking a stand. Those personal stands, however, will be the strengths of your best essays—as they are for your professors and their professional colleagues. In academic writing, when a writer has only a weak, unsubstantiated assertion to make the passive voice appears to cover up the lack of a stronger one.

It is generally known that engineers have smaller brains but better work habits than natural scientists.

Who is this general population? Scholarly readers will want to see a citation here. Unreflective use of the easily available passive crutch hobbles academic writing, and if you make a conscious effort not to rely on passive constructions in your prose you will be surprised how much your writing and thinking will improve

Remember: to use the passive voice effectively, use it sparingly. Otherwise, your writing may well evince the absurdity of this famous example...

"It was midday. The bus was being got into by passengers. They were being squashed together. A hat was being worn on the head of a young gentleman ...A long neck was one of the characteristics of the young gentleman. The man standing next to him was being grumbled at by the latter because of the jostling that was being inflicted on him by him. As soon as a vacant seat was espied by the young gentleman, it was made the object of his precipitate movements and it became sat down upon." (From *Text Book: An Introduction to Literary Language*, eds. Robert Scholes, Nancy R. Comley, and Gregory L. Ulmer. New York: St. Martin's Press (1988) 138-142.)

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