

College Writing #2 – Sentences That MOVE

Have you ever noticed how dry, stilted and dead-dog BORING textbooks can be? Be honest now, re-read a few papers you have written – they are just as bad, I bet. The culprit is PASSIVE VOICE. It sounds, well, passive – flat – stilted – ANNOYING.

After you've fixed your verbs in College Writing #1 the next most important step is to make your sentences GO somewhere.

Here is another simple rule of good academic writing: Use ACTIVE VOICE most of the time.

OK, so you forgot about voice entirely, haven't you? That was a point of grammar class that didn't seem all that important. Even assuming any of it seemed so in 6th grade!

Active voice

In a sentence written in the *active voice*, the subject of sentence performs the action and the direct object, if any, receives the action.

Mary broke the plate.
Ned threw the ball.
The class decided to collect cans.

Passive Voice

In a sentence written in the *passive voice* the subject receives the action.

The plate was broken by Mary.
The ball was thrown by Ned.
The decision to collect cans was made by the class.

The same information, I grant you, but unnecessarily wordy and somehow it 'sounds' smarter. Or does it, really? Passive voice is just MUSHIER somehow. To write with academic authority the active voice is your best friend.

Have a look at these two sentences. Which in each pair MOVES? Which emphasizes what the subject did to create the outcome?

Active: The senator *insists* that Congress *must pass* the crime bill.

Passive: *It is insisted on* by the senator that the crime bill *must be passed* by Congress.



Active: Carpenters always *knew* that solid construction *demand*s precise measurements.

Passive: It *has always been known* by carpenters that precise measurement *is demanded* by solid construction

See what I mean? Sentences built with Active Voice 'move' from left-to-right the way they should.

Seek and Destroy Missions – Finding the Passive Voice

To find your passive voice sentences take a quick editing pass through your assignment and look for just 2 things:

1. Prepositional phrases built with "by". They bury the 'doer' in a phrase and not as the subject of the sentence where it belongs. Move the subject to the beginning of the sentence.
2. If the subject of the sentence is some ill-defined pronoun, use a general term, such as "researchers," or "the study," or "experts in this field."

Now that you've gotten rid of all your Passive Voice-

OK, DO use Passive – in Its Place

There are sometimes good reasons to use the passive voice. Passive voice is a tool you can use to ...

...keep the focus on the action, not on the actor in a situation....

After long debate, the proposal *was endorsed* by the long-range planning committee.

...or to be tactful and not name the actor in a negative situation...

The procedures *were* somehow *misinterpreted*.

...when the actor is just not important...

Every year, thousands of people *are diagnosed* as having cancer.

...or to give directions/orders...

Visitors *are not allowed* after 9:00 p.m.



Stick to Active Voice as much as possible. That way you sound like you know your subject matter, not like you are trying to increase your word count.

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