

WRITER'S TRAINING KIT

Barbara Klare
Owner, CafeFAQ Communications
www.CafeFAQ.com

Module :: GRAMMAR FOR GROWNUPS Section :: ACTIVE vs. PASSIVE VOICE

ACTIVE verbs are more common than **PASSIVE** in the English language. We use a “subject-action-object” pattern more often than an “object-action-subject” pattern. One obvious reason, then, why writers should use active rather than passive voice is that readers are more likely to be familiar with it. As tech writers, we have more specific reasons for using active voice. We will describe those later.

ACTIVE VOICE

In the ACTIVE voice, the SUBJECT acts, the OBJECT receives the action, and the verb is ACTIVE.

EXAMPLE: The Personnel Manager will make the final decision.

PASSIVE VOICE

In the PASSIVE voice, the SUBJECT receives the action, the DOER of the action is named with a BY phrase, and the verb needs auxiliaries.

EXAMPLE: The final decision will be made by the Personnel Manager.

In other words,

In the ACTIVE voice, an ACTOR ACTS using an ACTED-UPON.

In the PASSIVE voice, however, this often takes the form of an ACTED-UPON, an ACTION, and lastly, AN ACTOR.

In summary,

ACTIVE voice shows clearly when the ACTOR is the responsible agent.

When emphasis must be placed on the RECEIVER of the action or on the ACTION (instead of the ACTOR), then PASSIVE voice is appropriate.



Technical writers should try to use ACTIVE rather than PASSIVE voice is **to achieve clarity and improve readability**.

--PASSIVE voice requires more words. Writers sometimes omit some of them. When this happens, readability is degraded, as the ACTOR is assumed.

EXAMPLE: They were taken to their seats.

--PASSIVE voice is less forcible.

EXAMPLES:

This statement is prepared every week. (PASSIVE)

You prepare this statement every week. (ACTIVE)

--PASSIVE questions cause readers to make more errors when answering. Questions phrased in the PASSIVE voice tend to lead people to assume that the event described has been established – that the question concerns the ACTOR.

EXAMPLE: When asked “Was the window broken by Tom?” the reader tends to accept that the window is indeed broken; however, when phrased in the ACTIVE voice, “Did Tom break the window?” the reader could answer more easily “No, the wind did it” or “No, Jim did” or “No, he broke the flowerpot” still make sense.

--PASSIVE voice is ambiguous. This is probably the single most important reason technical writers should strive to use ACTIVE voice whenever possible.

EXAMPLES:

It was reported that the new curriculum is going well. (PASSIVE – who reports it?)

It is said that this IRS ruling can be ignored safely. (PASSIVE – says who?)

To avoid giving complete information may be the reason for choosing the PASSIVE voice in the above examples, but in each case the reverse of the statement may also be true. One writer says on the subject,

“...the evasive passive... in such writing all agents are anonymous, and many statements are ambiguous. Helpful and useful information is omitted. Nobody is responsible for anything.”



As mentioned before, sometimes the PASSIVE voice should be used (did you notice this sentence is in PASSIVE voice?). When is the PASSIVE voice both appropriate and even preferable?

--When the RECEIVER of the ACTION should be highlighted.

EXAMPLE: These regulations must be strictly enforced.

--When the ACTOR does not need to be mentioned.

EXAMPLE: The store should be opened by September 15.

--When the context needs variety of expression.

--When a direct command needs to be softened.

EXAMPLE: These projects should be completed by July 1, at the latest.

--To suggest a bit of distance, objectivity or deliberation on the part of the writer.

EXAMPLE: The excessive use of the PASSIVE voice in scientific journals has given much rise to sardonic comments, and justifiably.

THOUGHT QUESTION

Legal language is notorious for being written in PASSIVE voice. Why is this a problem?

In 1936, Fred Rodell, a professor of law at Yale University, argued that there 'are two things wrong with almost all legal writing. One is its style. The other is its content. That, I think, about covers the ground.'

The law is about our rights and responsibilities. If we cannot understand the law, we have no rights and we cannot take responsibility, don't you think?

Barbara Klare owns CafeFAQ Communications. She firmly believes that tech writing is in its infancy and there is so much farther to go. You can contact her at barbara@cafefaq.com for the docs, information design, online content or just plain inspiration.