



MISTAKES WERE MADE (BY ZOMBIES)

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The saying goes that you have to know the rules before you can break them. Many skilled writers sometimes make the decision to break certain grammar rules, and the effect can be a beautifully constructed sentence. This is usually harmless, but the Always-Use-the-Active-Voice rule is the only grammar rule I know of that, when broken, has greater ramifications beyond how the audience perceives the writer. Besides the fact that many see the passive voice as “lazy” or “awkward,” its effects can leap off the supposedly objective page and influence the way we think.

Like most things in life, the use of the passive voice is all about intentionality. Our choices have the greatest positive impact when we are knowledgeable and purposeful about them. No writer’s work exists in a vacuum—consciously or subconsciously, everything that shapes who we are also shapes how we write. Our words eventually will become part of the greater cultural narrative of how we tell our history, whose stories we choose to emphasize and how. All those little decisions add up to something big.

“What the heck *is* the passive voice, anyway,” you may ask, “and why does everyone keep telling me not to use it?” Stick with me here, but I need to give you a quick grammar lesson before we continue, just so we’re all on the same page.

In grammar lingo, the subject is the person or thing performing the action, and the object is the person or thing being acted upon. This is in the active voice:

The puppy [subject] chased [verb] the ball [object].

If we change the sentence to the passive voice, the subject and the object switch places:

The ball [subject] was [verb] chased by the puppy [object].

Sounds weird, right? That’s because we’ve taken the focus off the adorable puppy and shifted it to the ball. Why do we care about the ball? Go back to the puppy!

A trendy tip for identifying the passive voice is if you can add or substitute the phrase *by zombies*:

The ball was chased (by zombies).

The proposal was unanimously approved (by zombies).

Each participant in the trial was shown (by zombies) a series of pleasant images before being punched in the face (by zombies).

This helps me remember the difference, because zombies are the most passive of all horror-movie antagonists.

In the case of the puppy and the ball, the verb changed from the active *chased* to the passive *was chased by* or, at its core, *was*. In most instances of the passive voice, the verb is some variant of *to be*: *is/are/ was/were*. This is why you'll often hear people describe the passive voice as “lazy” writing. But, of course, it's more complicated than that.

If you don't know how to look for the passive voice, it's easy to miss. If you don't know why it can be problematic, it's easy not to care. In his TED Talk, filmmaker and author Jackson Katz gives a great example of how this can be dangerous:

This comes from the work of the feminist linguist Julia Penelope. It starts with a very basic English sentence:

John [subject] beat [verb] Mary [object].

Now we're going to move to the second sentence, which says the same thing in the passive voice:

Mary [subject] was [verb] beaten by John [object].

... We shifted our focus in one sentence from John to Mary, and you can see John is very close to the end of the sentence, close to dropping off the map of our psychic plane. The third sentence, “John” is dropped, and we have:

Mary [subject] was [verb] beaten.¹

This shifts all too easily to “Mary is a battered woman,” or “Mary is a victim,” and now John's crime has become Mary's identity.

If this sort of rhetoric were the exception and not the rule, it might not be such a problem. Unfortunately, the passive voice is used this way so often that our eyes brush right over it without seeing how no one is being held accountable. Think about how many times you've heard a politician, CEO, or other powerful figure say something like, “Mistakes were made.” Oh, really? Those mistakes just made themselves, did they?

For these reasons, we can and should learn how to identify the passive voice and whether it's doing any damage. In *Speaking Freely: Unlearning the Lies of the Fathers' Tongues*, Julia Penelope says, “The rhetorical reasons for the popularity of the passive are obvious: remove the agent, shift the

¹ Jackson Katz, “Violence Against Women—It's a Men's Issue.” TED Conferences, LLC, May 2013.

hearer/reader's focus to the victim. . . . In order to defeat these deceptions, we have to learn to ask 'by whom?' when we hear an agentless passive. All it takes is a little practice."² We can learn to identify the passive voice not just in the writing and speech of others, but in our own.

In the wave of public response to the murder of Mike Brown, damali ayo stated:

I heard students at one of my recent visits to a college talk about how "I am in danger because of the color of my skin." This is not true, you are in danger because of the mindset of the culture and mentality and actions of other people. The burden is not on you. It is on them. You are not being killed (passive tense), people are killing you (active tense). You can't stop the passive tense, you can only stop the active tense. Stop the killing—then people will stop being killed.³

You don't walk out into the world and just happen to get killed like you just happen to get a cold. Viruses are blameless; murderers are not. Darren Wilson himself said about Mike Brown's parents, "I'm sorry that their son lost his life," not, "I'm sorry I killed their son."⁴ For those paying really close attention, his comment is technically in the active voice, but it's still conveying a sense of passivity. Wilson has taken himself as the agent out of the sentence and made Brown the one responsible.

But what happens when a person is not the intended focus of a sentence? I had heard that using the passive voice was encouraged in scientific writing, and not having done any myself, I wondered why that was. I asked around, and an acquaintance explained how scientific writing comes from a completely different tradition than journalistic or creative writing and therefore has its own particular set of standards.

[Passive voice] takes the focus off the people doing a thing, and puts it on the thing itself—which is the science, and which is what people reading scientific writing want to know. We probably don't care that Heather micropipetted 50 mL of whatever onto agar gel, but we probably do care that 50 mL of whatever got onto agar gel by means of a micropipette (and Heather signed off to say she'd done it).

. . . It expresses the priorities of its community: science is done by people, but it is not about people. It's supposed to be bigger than anyone (and everyone) involved; facts are supposed to be facts no matter who collected the data, or who is reporting it. One could argue about the extent to which this is actually the case, but it is so universally believed that a lot of people forget the sheer number of people involved in doing science. It's not impersonal because it's inhuman—it's actively depersonalized and that is because that depersonalization makes it easier to do well.⁵

² Julia Penelope, *Speaking Freely: Unlearning the Lies of the Fathers' Tongues* (New York: Pergamon, 1990).

³ damali ayo, "Quick Race Bites," damaliayotalks.tumblr.com, November 1, 2014.

⁴ "Ferguson officer Darren Wilson has 'clear conscience' over Michael Brown shooting," *The Guardian*, November 25, 2014.

⁵ Mace Spiegel, online message exchange, October 24, 2014.

This is a great example of when you can use the passive voice effectively. It puts the focus where it needs to be: on the science, not the scientist.

In creative writing, however, the passive voice is usually discouraged, since active voice feels more dynamic and propels the reader forward. But using the active voice just because it “sounds better” isn’t enough. Novelist Dorothy Allison objected to how often she encountered the passive voice when reading sex scenes, especially in ways that made the woman seem passive or victimized. So when she wrote her own books, she deliberately used the active voice in sex scenes to give her heroines their rightful focus and power.

On the other hand, plenty of well-respected authors have chosen to use the passive voice in beautiful ways. Let’s unpack two of my favorites.

“The story so far: In the beginning the Universe was created. This has made a lot of people very angry and been widely regarded as a bad move.” – Douglas Adams

Adams does not specify who or what created the Universe. As much as we might want to hold someone accountable for this bad move, we can’t. Likewise, we do not know who or what is judging this as a bad move. In a classic example of Adams’ genius, the chaotic, infuriating anonymity swirling around in the quote is reflective of the Universe itself.

“Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.” – G.K. Chesterton

Which leaves us to wonder: dragons can be beaten *by whom?* The implication is, by each of us. It is a deliciously subtle empowerment. Go, Reader. Fight and beat your dragons.

Academic writing is a tricky, slippery creature that contains some aspects of all three of these traditions—journalistic writing, science writing, and creative writing—plus its own set of standards. We must constantly walk the line between objective and subjective, adjusting our tone to fit the particular assignment. If you’re taking a science class, your faculty may encourage you to use the passive voice. Or you may get teachers who hate it and never want to see it in your writing. If you’re working on an assignment and don’t know whether to use the passive voice in a particular sentence, ask yourself who or what in the sentence has the power and what that conveys to the reader.

A great time to practice weeding out the passive voice in your writing is in your self-evaluations and Academic Statement. You want to make yourself look good, so using active language like *I learned*. . . *I created*. . . *I facilitated*. . . can help assure your readers that you are the one in charge of your education. But even here, you can use the passive voice deliberately with good results. In a recent self-evaluation, I read through my first draft, looking for instances of the passive voice I could reword. I found one that said, “I was fascinated by the lectures.” It had crept in accidentally, but the decision to keep it was intentional. This wording put the focus on me and my learning; if I had said, “The lectures were fascinating,” the focus would have been on the program itself.

Your education does not end with graduation from Evergreen, and you will continue to write and speak sentences for the rest of your life. If you know the semantic tools available to you, you can make better choices about how to use them. Whether you use the active or passive voice, great, but make it an intentional choice.

What we read shapes how we think, and how we think shapes how we write. If we can interrupt this cycle and make different decisions about how we write, this can change the landscape of what people read and, in turn, change the way they think. As a writer, you have the ability to shift the power dynamics of a sentence. The passive voice is like any tool— designed (by zombies) to help us, but in the wrong hands can become a weapon. So what do you want your writing to do: build or destroy?

