Active and Passive Voice in Creative Writing

Who's Doing What to Whom (and Why It Matters)

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The Rule Everyone Knows But Few Understand

Every writer, at some point, gets handed a short list of commandments. "Show, don't tell." "Write every day." And then, spoken with the gravity of a monk passing down sacred scripture: "Use the active voice." You've heard it. You've nodded along. You may have even repeated it to someone else. But do you really know what it means — and more importantly, do you know when to break it?

Like most writing rules, the directive to use the active voice is excellent advice most of the time, genuinely misunderstood much of the time, and occasionally wrong. By the end of this article, you'll know exactly what active and passive voice are, why one usually serves your writing better than the other, how to fix passive constructions when they sneak into your prose, and — crucially — when leaving them in is actually the smarter choice.

Let's start at the beginning.

What Is Active Voice?

William Strunk Jr., whose slim but mighty *The Elements of Style* has been terrorizing writing students for over a century, put it plainly: "The active voice is usually more direct and vigorous than the passive." But what does that mean structurally?

Active voice is straightforward: the grammatical subject of the sentence is the one performing the action. The subject does the verb. That's it. Consider this sentence: *The girl rode the pony*. The girl — our subject — is doing the riding. She's not having something done to her; she's the instigator, the agent, the doer. Here are a few more examples to cement the idea:

Tyler frequently wears colorful Hawaiian shirts. Mankind took its first steps on the moon in 1969. Abby wondered if Devin was going to ask her to the winter dance.

In every case, notice how the subject leads the action. Tyler wears. Mankind took. Abby wondered. There's a sense of momentum, of characters and people occupying the driver's seat of their own sentences. William Zinsser, author of the indispensable *On Writing Well*, captured why this matters: "Verbs are the most important of all your tools. They push the sentence forward and give it momentum. Active verbs push hard; passive verbs tug fitfully." That image of tugging fitfully is

worth holding onto. It tells you everything you need to know about what passive voice feels like on the page.

What Is Passive Voice?

Passive voice flips the dynamic. Now the grammatical subject is the recipient of the action — the thing being acted upon — rather than the performer. Take our earlier example and reverse it: *The pony was ridden by the girl.* The pony is now the subject, and instead of doing something, it's having something done to it. The girl, who drove the whole action, gets demoted to a prepositional phrase tacked on at the end. She feels like an afterthought.

Try the same trick with the other examples: *Colorful Hawaiian shirts are frequently worn by Tyler. Mankind's first steps on the moon were taken in 1969.* The first two function, technically, but they feel sluggish compared to their active counterparts. And then there's poor Abby: *If Devin was going to ask her to the winter dance was wondered by Abby.* At that point, the sentence doesn't just lose energy — it collapses entirely. The passive voice hasn't just weakened the prose; it's made it nearly unintelligible.

A useful marker to watch for is the auxiliary "be" verb — forms like *is, was, were, has been, will be, had been* — paired with a past-tense main verb. Sentences constructed as "was + past participle" are almost certainly passive. *The sword was swung. The book was written. The flowers were planted.* That structure is your signal to pay attention.

The Zombie Test (Yes, Really)

If you're still not sure whether a sentence is passive, Rebecca Johnson, Vice President for Academic Affairs at Marine Corps University, devised a wonderfully absurd diagnostic while she was a professor of culture and ethics. It goes like this: if you can insert the phrase "by zombies" after the verb and the sentence still makes grammatical sense, you've got passive voice.

Hawaiian shirts are frequently worn… by zombies. That works — passive voice confirmed, and now you have a fashion statement to reckon with. *Mankind's first steps on the moon were taken… by zombies.* Perfect sense, deeply unsettling. Now try it with active sentences: *Tyler frequently wears… by zombies.* Doesn't work. *Abby wondered… by zombies.* Nope. Active voice is zombie-resistant.

You might be surprised how often passive voice slips into your writing uninvited. It tends to creep in during revision fatigue, or when you're not quite sure

how to frame a sentence and default to something that sounds authoritative. It rarely is.

Why Does It Matter?

The Effect on Readers

Here's the fundamental problem with passive voice used habitually: it makes readers work harder for no reward. Active writing carries readers forward; passive writing asks them to pause, untangle the syntax, and reconstruct who did what to whom before they can move on. That cognitive friction adds up, and readers have a remarkably low tolerance for friction. Whether you're writing a literary novel or assembly instructions for a barbecue grill, you never want your reader to put the thing down before they've reached the end. Passive voice, in excess, gives them every reason to do exactly that.

The Effect on Characters

If you write fiction, passive voice is even more damaging because it robs your characters of agency. A character who exists in active voice *does* things — she investigates, confronts, decides, escapes. A character trapped in passive voice has things done *to* her. She becomes a passive participant in her own story, buffeted by events she never seems to initiate. Readers bond with characters who act, not with characters who are acted upon. If your protagonist spends too much time being rescued, being deceived, and being informed, readers will stop caring — not because the character is weak, but because the prose has made her feel like furniture.

What It Says About You

There's a confidence question buried in all of this. Stephen King, in *On Writing*, addressed it with characteristic bluntness. He described the writer who opts for *The meeting will be held at seven o'clock* rather than the simpler *The meeting's at seven*, and diagnosed the impulse as timidity — the feeling that burying a statement in passive construction somehow makes it sound more authoritative. King's advice: "Throw back your shoulders, stick out your chin, and put that meeting in charge!" The passive voice can make you seem, as a writer, as though you're hedging, retreating, unsure of what you're saying. Say what you mean. Active voice is the prose equivalent of eye contact.

How to Fix Passive Voice

When you encounter a passive sentence that would read better in active voice, converting it is a three-step process that becomes instinctive with practice.

First, identify the passive construction. Look for the auxiliary "be" verb combined with a past-tense main verb, and look for that telltale "by..." phrase. *The dog is walked by his owner*. There it is.

Second, determine the correct tense for the main verb by reading the auxiliary. If the auxiliary is "is" (present tense), your active verb will be present tense: *walks* or *is walking*. If it's "was being," your active verb will be past tense: *was walking*. The auxiliary carries the temporal information, so pay attention to it before you discard it.

Third, make the performer of the action the grammatical subject. In *The dog is walked by his owner*, the owner is doing the walking. Promote the owner to subject, conjugate the verb correctly, and drop the "by" preposition: *The owner walks his dog*. That's it. A few more examples to make it concrete: *The flowers were being planted by the gardener* becomes *The gardener was planting the flowers*. *The book was written by the author* becomes *The author wrote the book*. Simple, direct, energized.

If you want a technological assist, tools like the Hemingway Editor, or the web-based Passive Voice Detector can scan your writing and flag passive constructions for you. They're not infallible, but they're useful — especially in a long draft when your eyes have stopped seeing your own sentences clearly.

When Passive Voice Is Actually the Right Choice

Here is where a lot of writing instruction goes wrong: it treats "avoid passive voice" as an absolute law rather than a strong default preference. Passive voice is not grammatically incorrect. More importantly, used deliberately, it can be a sophisticated stylistic tool.

Consider a scenario where the receiver of the action — not the performer — is your real subject of interest. Imagine you're writing a novel that follows a stray puppy. Early in the story, you write: *The puppy, whimpering and wet, was found on the side of the road by Billy*. This construction puts the puppy at the center of the sentence, which is exactly where it belongs in a story told from the puppy's perspective. The active version — *Billy found the puppy, whimpering and wet, on the side of the road* — makes Billy the subject and is the stronger sentence if the story is Billy's. Voice choice follows narrative focus.

There are also situations where the identity of the performer is unknown, irrelevant, or obvious enough that naming them would be clutter. Consider: *The woman was sentenced to five years in jail*. This passive construction is entirely appropriate because the emphasis belongs on the woman and her sentence, not on

the judge, whose role in the sentencing is self-evident. Rewriting it as *The judge sentenced the woman to five years in jail* doesn't improve the sentence; it just shifts the emphasis in a direction that may not serve your story.

Passive voice also has a long history in contexts requiring a veneer of objectivity or social delicacy. Academic writing uses it routinely — *It is suggested that…* reads as more measured than *I think that…* — and journalists reach for it when they need to report a situation without attribution: *A mistake was made.* Deliberately or not, this can shade into evasion, but as a stylistic choice in fiction it can be wonderfully effective. Jane Austen was a master of using passive construction to maintain the formal, polite surface of her narratives while slyly undercutting her characters. A line like *Mr. Warren discovered he had been sent another invitation to dine with the Smiths, though he had graciously declined the first four* keeps the social embarrassment indirect, which is precisely the point. The passive voice here mimics the practiced discretion of Austen's world.

And sometimes, passive voice simply varies the rhythm of your prose. Reading page after page of aggressive active-voice sentences can feel like being marched through a field at double time. An occasional passive construction creates a natural pause, a slight change in pace that prevents your writing from becoming monotonous.

The key distinction — and this is worth repeating — is between passive voice that slips into your writing accidentally and passive voice you choose deliberately. Accidental passive voice is almost always a problem. Deliberate passive voice, used sparingly and in service of a clear purpose, is a legitimate technique.

The Conscious Choice

At its core, the debate about active versus passive voice is a debate about intention. Strong writers don't follow rules blindly; they understand why the rules exist, which gives them the freedom to know when to break them. The directive to use active voice is one of the most reliably useful pieces of writing advice you'll ever receive, but it is not a law of physics. It is a strong default born from the recognition that passive voice, left unchecked, drains energy from your prose, distances readers from your characters, and makes you sound uncertain of your own story.

So, open your current project, run a search for "was," "were," and "been," and look at what those words are doing. Most of the time, you'll find a passive construction that could stand to be strengthened. Occasionally, you'll find one that's doing exactly what it should. Learn to tell the difference, and then — throwback your shoulders, stick out your chin, and decide. Your readers will feel it either way.