n defence of the passive voice

Geoffrey Marnell

In factual writing, plain English is good English. That, on the face of it, is incontrovertible. So it is worthy of attention when Plain English Foundation in Australia tells us that plain English is writing that prefers the active voice over the passive.[1]

The active voice has indeed become the voice recommended in contemporary language manuals, including those that give advice to technical writers:

"Use the active voice."[2]

"Where possible, documentation developers should use the active voice."[3]

Technical writers seem to have adopted this advice with enthusiasm—perhaps a little too much enthusiasm. For there is a place for the passive voice, even in technical writing.

What is voice?

A common definition of active and passive voice—and one that covers most cases—is one that ties voice to the relationship between *agent* and *subject*. In simple terms, the subject of a sentence is whatever is being singled out for discussion. Pam Peters—Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at Macquarie University—describes it as "the person or thing which operates the verb".[4] To find the subject, simply locate the verb in the sentence and make it the focus of a *who* or *what* question:

[1] *The dogs* barked loudly. [verb = *barked*; who or what barked? The dogs.]

[2] *The error* was found by the chief technician. [verb = w*as found*; who or what was found? The error.][5]

In an active sentence, the person or thing that does the action expressed by the verb—that is, the agent—is, in general, the subject of the sentence. In a passive sentence, the person or thing that does the action expressed by the verb is not mentioned in the subject.

Thus example [1] above is an active sentence. The subject is *the dogs*, the verb is *barked* and the person or thing that did the barking (the dogs) happens also to be the subject of the sentence. Example [2] is passive.

The subject is *the error*, the verb is *was found* and the person or thing that did the finding (the chief technician) is not the subject of the sentence.

Where the agent is not mentioned at all, the sentence is in the *agentless passive* voice:

[3] The error was found.

So, where the agent is the subject we have an active sentence, and where the agent is not the subject, or not mentioned at all, we have a passive sentence.

That is the common view of active and passive voice. Linguists, however, have a tighter definition: the passive voice is characterised by a periphrastic verb that combines an auxiliary verb (such as *was*, *were*, *got*, etc.) and a past participle (*found*, *eaten*, *questioned*, etc.). Sentences or clauses without an auxiliary verb and past participle are necessarily active. Thus "The cakes were eaten by the students" is passive and "The students ate the cakes" is active. In most cases, the common view and the linguists' view coincide. However, the linguists' view allows there to be active sentences without agents.

Finally, voice is a property of *verbs*, although we often see *sentences* or *clauses* referred to as active or passive. Where a sentence has only one verb, it is relatively harmless to call the *sentence* active or passive. But a sentence may have more than one verb and they may differ in voice. One might call these sentences of *mixed voice*, yet the presence of a passive verb in a multi-verb sentence is usually sufficient for linguists to call such a sentence a *passive* sentence.

Why worry about passive voice?

For a start, technical writers disposed towards the active voice can limit their worry, for much of what they write—namely, procedural steps—has traditionally been expressed in the active voice. For example:

Enter the ASIC code.

Replace the crossover tube.

On the face of it, such imperatives do not look like active sentences as they have no stated subject. But imperatives such as these have an *implied* subject, namely, the person to whom they are addressed. Thus *Enter the ASIC code* is shorthand for *You can (or should) now enter the ASIC code*, with *you* being the subject. So interpreted, the subject is clearly the agent, and thus such imperatives express the active voice. Moreover, procedural steps, as traditionally expressed, do not have a periphrastic verb comprising an auxiliary and a past participle, and thus linguists would classify them as active.

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1. See http://www.plainenglishfoundation.com/WhatisplainEnglish/tabid/3058/Default.aspx. Viewed 8 June 2009.
2. M Roze, *Technical communication: The practical craft*, Prentice-Hall, 3rd edn, 1997, p. 25.
3. ISO/IEC 26514 (2008): *Systems and software engineering—Requirements for designers and developers of user documentation.*
4. Pam Peters, *The Cambridge guide to Australian English usage*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK)., 2nd edn, 2007, p. 767.
5. In linguistics, *was found* is called a *periphrastic verb*, one that is made up of an auxiliary verb and a participle: *was* [auxiliary verb] + *found* [past participle of *find*].

But technical writers write more than just commands, so it is worthwhile considering objections that have been raised to the passive voice. The most prominent of these appear to be that the passive voice:

- is inelegant, even ugly
- is not our natural voice
- can lead to ambiguity
- can unintentionally change the focus of a sentence
- is dull and monotonous

What is wrong with the passive voice? Apparently it's downright ugly.

In a recent paper on plain English, Dr Neil James, the executive director of Plain English Foundation in Australia, states that the passive voice can "reduce precision and clarity and increase the demands on readers in comprehending a text".[1] To show the difference between the active and passive, he uses the following example:

> [4] "I think you can fund this project from your existing budget."

This sentence is in the active voice, and James goes on to give what he claims to be the passive equivalent of it:

> [5] "It is suggested that consideration be given to the implementation of the project out of existing budgetary resources."[2]

But sentence [5] is in no way the passive equivalent of [4]. It is a passive sentence and it is an ugly sentence. But its ugliness doesn't stem from its voice: it stems from all the additional bloat and excessive formality that James has added to it, bloat and formality that one doesn't find in the so-called active equivalent. Converting the active sentence to the passive—and not adding the bloat and formality absent in the original—yields the following sentence:

> [6] I think this project can be funded from your existing budget.

Stripped of all its bloat and formality, the true passive equivalent of the original sentence is not as ugly as James makes out.

Moreover, active sentences can be ugly too. Here is an active equivalent of [5], the sentence that James claims is the passive equivalent of [4]:

> [7] I suggest that you give consideration to the implementation of the project out of existing budgetary resources.

By retaining all the bloat and formality present in passive sentence [5], sentence [7], although active, is no less ugly than sentence [5].

So the passive voice has no monopoly on tortuous language.

Active is our natural voice

John Kirkman claims that the active voice is our natural voice and thus should be our preference.[3] Kirkman calls the subject–verb–object order "normal" in English, but he makes it clear that by *subject* he means the actor or agent. (This is not the same as the grammatical subject discussed on page 1.) Even so, Kirkman is dismissing as *not normal* a good deal of standard English, such as questions and statements beginning with the existential *there*:

> Are you already at home? [question]

> There are five cases already packed. [statement beginning with the existential *there*]

These sentences are normal sentences, despite them not being in the subject–verb–object order.

I suspect that Kirkman is really only claiming that sentences in the active voice are more common than sentences in the passive. And that is true. But how important is that in deciding what voice to adopt? Imperatives are less common than declaratives in English, but that doesn't mean that we should avoid all imperatives. How could we? Thus the predominance of the active voice, on its own, is no good reason for abandoning the passive.

Once upon a time, classical harmony was considered natural, indeed *normal*, music. The major and minor keys of early classical music were considered to define all that was best and natural in music. But how dull it would be if that view was still dominant, if the voice of music that was apparently natural 250 years ago—in the era of Handel and Haydn—was still the voice of music today. Goodbye Debussy, Stravinsky and Pärt; hello monotony.

Passive can lead to ambiguity

It is sometimes argued that the passive voice should be avoided because it leads to ambiguity. Here are some examples from software user guides:

> "A name is given to each price category."

Is this an instruction to the reader to give each price category a name? (If so, the text should read "Enter a name for each price category".) Or is it merely a statement that the system gives each category a name? (In this case, *automatically* should appear in the sentence.)

1. N James, "Speketh so pleyne: A historical approach to plain English", *Southern Communicator*, issue 16, February 2009, p. 18.
2. ibid.
3. J Kirkman, *Good style: Writing for science and technology*, Routledge, London, 2nd edn, 2005, p. 51. This is echoed in *Scientific Style and Format*, published by Council of Science Editors (1994, p. 38): "The active is the natural voice, the one in which people usually speak or write …".

Another example:

> "The record may be returned to Data Entry status if it is necessary to correct any errors."

Who or what does the returning? The system? Or the user of the system? By suppressing the agent, these examples leave the reader wondering if they have to do something or whether the system will do it.

All that might be true, but it is not an argument against using passive voice. At most it is an argument against using the *agentless* passive voice. The agent could be added to the predicate of both examples, thus overcoming the ambiguity, while still retaining the passive voice:

> The record may be returned to Data Entry status *by the system* if it is necessary to correct any errors.

This is not a particularly elegant sentence, but at least the ambiguity over the agent has been resolved.

Even so, ambiguity is not a hallmark of the passive voice. Active sentences can be ambiguous too. We might refine the complaint against the agentless passive by saying that agentless passive is often ambiguous *if the reader needs to know who or what does the stated action*. But this is no stronger a criticism of the agentless passive than the criticism that an active sentence is often ambiguous *if it uses a transition word* (that is, a word with two or more strong meanings). An example is:

> Given the defendant's ridicule of the legal profession, the judge is showing remarkable *disinterest*.

This is an active sentence, but is the judge revealing boredom? Or impartiality?

Ambiguity plagues all forms of writing. It is not limited to any particular voice. You do not necessarily rid your writing of ambiguity by shunning the passive voice.

Passive can give the wrong the focus

Kirkman notes that changing from active voice to passive usually changes the focus of a sentence:

> "To make an arbitrary change from *Two thin struts linked the plates to the rig* to *The plates were linked to the rig by two thin struts* is to change the emphasis from the struts to the plates."[1]

In other words, if a writer has a preference for passive writing—as many academics and scientists do—casting all sentences in the passive voice may well dispose readers to focus on something other than the main thing that the writer wants to single out for discussion.

Well, yes, that's true; but it is no argument against the passive voice. A writer may not want the focus to fall

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1.   Kirkman, op. cit. p. 50.

on the *agent* that does something, but on the *thing that the agent does*. In that case, a preference for the *active* voice would have changed the focus from what the writer intended. So Kirkman's criticism of the passive voice can work both ways.

Suppose, for example, that you are writing maintenance instructions for a piece of equipment and have just directed the user to remove a cover-plate. You want them to look inside the now exposed cavity for signs of deterioration, wear and tear, and the like. What you want them to focus on are *effects*, not *causes*—that is, what an agent has *brought about* as opposed to which *agent* it was. In this situation, it is better to write:

> A build up of rust is caused by water penetration.

> Sulphur deposits are caused by the engine running too hot.

These are passive sentences, but they are entirely appropriate. For here the emphasis, the focus, is on signs of deterioration or wear and tear, not their likely cause. That's what we want the reader to look for. And that's why it is best to make an effect the subject of the sentence, not the agent that caused the effect. To write these sentences in the active voice would be to change the intended emphasis or focus:

> Water penetration will have caused a build up of rust.

> An engine that is too hot will have caused sulphur deposits.

The mechanic will probably still need to know the cause of the effects they are looking for—if repairs are necessary—but at this particular point in the procedure we are directing them to look for the problems, not the cause of the problems.

Here is another example:

> The reports will be printed in triplicate.

This is an agentless passive sentence. An equivalent active version is:

> The printer will print the reports in triplicate.

But now the focus is on the printer rather than on the reports, and this is unlikely to be the intention of the writer.

The same considerations apply to the sentence that James used to belittle the passive voice (see page 2). Compare the second clause in sentence [4] with the second clause in sentence [6].

> [4] "… you can fund this project from your existing budget."

> [6] "… this project can be funded from your existing budget."

In [4], the clause is active and the focus is the subject of the clause: *you*. In [6], the clause is passive and the focus is, again, the subject of the clause: *this project*.

But it seems unlikely that the writer of [4] would have wanted the focus to be on a person rather than on a project that seems in doubt—*in which case*, pace *James, it is the passive that presents the right focus, not the active*.

To sum up: a policy of always writing in the passive voice might rob a writer of the ability to manipulate focus. But so too does a policy of always writing in the active voice.

To be fair to Kirkman—who raised the issue of focus switching—he does go on to acknowledge that deliberately shifting the focus away from the agent, if handled well, is an invaluable technique:

> "Skilful writers increase the precision with which they convey meaning by deliberately moving from active to passive."[1]

Hang on: always specifying the agent can be unnecessary and hence lead to wordiness

Many technical writers think that for a sentence to be active, the agent must be mentioned. Thus they feel the need to write, say, "FrameMaker closes the **View Options** window" rather than the more economical "The **View Options** window closes".

But a sentence doesn't need to state an agent for it to be in the active voice. "Colour readers will be on sale soon" is an active sentence even though it has no agent. Recall that what characterises the passive voice is an auxiliary verb plus a past participle—*was found, were eaten, got questioned*, and so on—and no such construction is found in "Colour readers will be on sale soon". Likewise, no such construction is found in "The **View Options** window closes".

It's true that if the agent is in the subject of the sentence, the sentence is active (as explained on page 1). But it doesn't follow that if there is no agent in the subject that the sentence is not active. To argue that would be to fall foul of the fallacy of denying the antecedent. Likewise, if a sentence is in the agentless passive voice, it follows that there is no agent mentioned. But it doesn't then follow that if no agent is mentioned, the sentence must be in the agentless passive voice. That would be an example of the fallacy of affirming the consequent.

Thus technical writers who feel the need to write always in the active voice are not necessarily writing in the passive if they do not mention the agent. Indeed, when the context makes it bleedingly obvious who or what the agent is, writers who feel that they must always include the agent are wasting their own time and that of their readers. If the context makes it clear that, say, FrameMaker will close the **View Options** window, there is simply no need to mention FrameMaker at all. Moreover, you risk the reader sensing that you are treating them paternalistically, and thus risk them adopting an antagonistic attitude towards the text. ("I know that it is Framemaker that will close the **View Options** window when I click **Close**. It's a FrameMaker user guide I'm reading, for goodness sake. So why keep telling me, at every step, that FrameMaker will do this and FrameMaker will do that? Do you think I'm so stupid as to not know that it is the software I am using that can do things without being reminded of that fact all the time?")

Yes, it's true that omitting the agent can, on occasion, lead to ambiguity (as illustrated on page 2). But it doesn't always lead to ambiguity. If I instruct a reader to click **Close**, there is next to no chance that a sane reader will be puzzled by an accompanying sentence that reads "The **View Options** window closes". Will they think "Do I have to close the **View Options** window, or will the system close it for me?". I have already told them that the closing of the window is a result of them clicking **Close**. There is nothing more for them to do. So obviously it is the system that will do the closing, and mentioning the agent is quite unnecessary.

As is often the case in prescriptivist language manuals, a potential flaw with a particular construction (such as the ambiguity that can result from a dangling participle) is generalised into a prescription *never* to use constructions of that type ("Never dangle a participle"). A far more sensible approach is to examine each instance in turn and, if there is likelihood of ambiguity or misunderstanding, recast the sentence. Otherwise, leave it as it is (as many dangling participles are entirely innocuous). Likewise, agentless writing may, on occasion, lead to ambiguity. But that doesn't mean that it will always be ambiguous. If it isn't ambiguous, it's as good advice as any to leave it as it is.

Is the passive dull and monotonous?

Writing that is predominantly in the passive can be, and often is, dull and dreary. A preference for the passive has infected much of academic writing, and it has been the predominant style in scientific writing for centuries. And many of us do find academic and scientific writing dull.

> "Because passive verbs play down the agent (or make it invisible) they are not the stuff of lively narrative, [especially] when you want to know who is doing what. Used too often, as in some academic and official styles, they make for dreary reading."[2]

But is the dullness solely the result of the passive voice? Or must some of the blame be attributed to repetitiveness: the unthinking application of the same style of writing over and over, as if writing to a formula. To keep our readers engaged, we need to do more than just provide them with content that interests them: we also need to provide it in ways that don't cause them to nod off. Variety is the spice of

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1. op. cit., p. 50.

2. Peters, op. cit., p. 602.

life, and that extends to writing. For instance, we need to vary our sentence lengths and sentence types if we want to keep our readers engaged. Perhaps we need to include *voice* among the attributes we vary from time to time.

Scientific writing might be dull and monotonous to many. But would we invigorate it if every sentence were to be recast in the active voice? I suspect that the materials and methods section in a typical scientific report would be just as dull and monotonous if the agent was always mentioned:

> The experimenters then added nitric acid to the beaker. The experimenters then agitated the beaker for 30 seconds before applying heat to it. The experimenters then noted the specific gravity … The experimenters then … The experimenters then … zzz

So active voice too can be dull and monotonous. *But maybe it is the repetition that induces sleep in the reader, not the choice of voice.*

In conclusion

With the exception of the charge that it can lead to ambiguity, complaints against the passive voice appear to be mostly subjective and personal, and thus more a question of style than substance. And where passive voice can cause ambiguity, the problem is not with the passive voice itself, but with the omission of the agent. And this can be corrected without changing the voice.

I am not suggesting that we should embrace the passive voice as our preferred voice. Far from it. For a start, not every active sentence has a passive equivalent. "Bees collect nectar" does not mean the same as "Nectar is collected by bees". The former is true; the latter only partly true, ignoring the fact that animals other than bees also collect nectar (honey-eater birds, for example). Second, the passive equivalent of some active sentences is unidiomatic. For example, the passive equivalent of "John watched the sun set" is "The setting sun was watched by John". This might pass a grammatical muster, but we simply don't talk or write that way. It would be unconventional and unidiomatic. A reader who encountered it would find its structure odd and distracting. Fine in poetry, perhaps, but a boil on the bum of declarative or indicative writing. Third, the active can be more economical than the passive. So there *are* problems with the passive. But what is bereft of logic is the studious avoidance of the passive voice, as if it were a strain of some linguistic virus that robs our writing of its vigour and vitality.

Seasoned commentators on the ways of effective communication have long acknowledged the usefulness of the passive voice:

> "The passive voice is a valuable feature of the English language, and one widely used in all forms of writing and speaking, not just in science and technology."[1]

> "The passive has a place in any writer's stylistic inventory, in spite of the problems associated with it—its dullness, and the fact that it seems to be habit forming in some institutions or professions. Used occasionally it's a graceful alternative to the active construction, and a useful device for altering the focus … of a sentence."[2]

Finally, is writing that uses passive voice writing in breach of the principles of plain English? Plain Language Association International has this to say in its writing guidelines:

> "Use passive voice when appropriate and necessary."[3]

Dr Neil James, the Executive Director of Plain English Foundation in Australia, appears to have a foot in both camps. On the one hand, he counsels against using passives:

> "… the verb 'to be' is not your friend and it will deaden your text. Kill 'to be' *wherever you can* and replace it with something more vigorous."[4]

This tallies with comments James has made elsewhere (see page 2 above). And yet later in *Writing at work* James allows passives in writing, but only as long as they "[do not] outnumber the active verbs".[5] He then goes on to give instances where the passive is acceptable, namely:

- where you do not know who or what the agent is

- where the agent is obvious or unimportant

- where the object rather than the agent is more important

- in order to maintain linguistic flow[6]

Thus some whose writings suggest, in some places, that they are trenchant critics of the passive voice do acknowledge, in other places, that the passive voice has a place in writing. And it does.

And that, your honour, completes the case for the defence.

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1. Kirkman, op. cit., p. 49.
2. Peters, op. cit., p. 603.
3. See http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/stephens/intro.html. Viewed 8 June 2009.
4. N James, *Writing at work*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2007, p. 176. Emphasis added.
5. ibid., p. 225.
6. ibid., p. 234–235.