



## Active Versus Passive Sentence Construction: Which Is the Best Choice?

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Much ado has been made recently about the use of grammatical “voice” in contemporary sentence construction. Many writers, teachers, and even word processing software packages abhor the use of the passive voice and go to great lengths to obliterate it from existence. But could strict adherence to this practice cramp our communication style? Are there any circumstances in which the passive voice might be best?

This tongue-in-cheek commentary presents four lighthearted communication scenarios that explore these questions. Three of the scenarios advocate the use of the active voice in promoting clarity and flow, while the fourth presents a situation in which use of the passive voice is not only grammatically correct, but actually preferable.

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The debate over the correct use of [active versus passive voice](#) rages on, but there seems to be no conclusive resolution to the dilemma. Clearly, there are many instances where the active voice is much better, but there are also times when the passive voice is preferred or even required. Following are three case studies that support the use of the active construction, and another that argues for use of the passive voice.

### The Active Voice

As writers, we are instructed time and again to use the active voice. According to English teachers, authors of usage and grammar texts, and linguistic prescriptivists (otherwise known as the grammar police), the active voice is considered “more direct and vigorous” ([Strunk and White](#) 18). Further, use of the passive voice can result in less ambiguity and confusion with regard to the writer’s intended meaning.

#### The Case of Fifi and the Semi-Truck

According to [William Safire](#), author of *Fumblerules*, passive constructions are “so called because the subject of each sentence is lying there, lollygagging flat on his back, receiving the action passively” (71). This is clearly demonstrated in our first scenario in which Kate, an animal lover, witnesses a huge truck running over her poodle. She screams:

*“Oh my God! That \*@#%!^& truck just killed my poor Fifi!”*

We might, however, wonder why Kate’s initial thoughts were of the semi that ran over her dog rather than of the dog itself, since by using the active voice, she makes *truck* the subject of her sentence. But if Kate decides to react in the passive voice, she might shriek:

*“Oh my God! My poor Fifi was just killed by that \*@#%!^& truck!”*

In this case, *Fifi* is the subject of the sentence, a position to which she has every right, considering the circumstances. Unfortunately, however, Fifi now fits Safire’s description of the passive voice: she is indeed

“lying there, lollygagging flat” after her contretemps with the semi.

It is easy to see that Kate’s use of the active construction seems more dynamic. We, as spectators, perceive a greater sense of engagement when the truck, which performed the action, is the subject of the sentence. Even though we can certainly make a case for Kate’s use of the passive voice in describing Fifi’s demise, it is unlikely that this construction would, realistically, be the first to leap to mind.

### **The Case of Lisa’s Cape Cod Vacation**

The argument for use of the active voice is even more apparent when considering the next scenario. Lisa is taking her first vacation on Cape Cod. At the age of ten, Lisa has not yet fully refined her writing skills. In composing a postcard message to her grandparents, she initially uses the passive voice:

*My first trip to Cape Cod will never be forgotten by me.*

Lisa is a bright child, however. Aware that there may be a thing or two that she has not yet learned about the art of writing, she asks her mother to read her postcard and identify any mistakes that she may have made. Because Mother happens to be a professional writer, she is immediately able to identify the problem. She explains to Lisa that her sentence construction is somewhat awkward because she is using the passive voice, and that her meaning is not immediately clear to the reader. She suggests that Grandma and Papa might find it easier to understand her sentence if it were rewritten.

Lisa has been feeling uncomfortable with the words *by me* that she has tagged on to what seems to be an otherwise good sentence. Beginning again, Lisa writes:

*My first trip to Cape Cod will never be forgotten.*

Proudly, she shows her mother the second attempt. Mother praises Lisa’s perception that *by me* at the end of the sentence shouldn’t be there. However, Mother suggests to Lisa that she may want to do some more thinking about the meaning of her message as it is written. After a few minutes, Lisa exclaims, “Hey, I know what’s wrong! If I write ‘My first trip to Cape Cod will never be forgotten,’ we can’t tell who it is that won’t forget!” The plucky ten-year-old goes to work again, and this time she produces the following sentence, written in the active voice:

*I will never forget my first trip to Cape Cod.*

Mother beams. Lisa mails the postcard, and Grandma and Papa brag about their brilliant little granddaughter to all of their friends.

In the case of Fifi and the truck, either the active or the passive construction would be acceptable, because both sentences are well formed and easily understood. In the case of the Cape Cod vacation, however, the active voice is the only good choice. The sentences Lisa constructed using the passive voice are either not well formed or unclear.

### **The Case of Bastian and the Rainy Day**

There are many sentence constructions that make sense only when the active voice is employed. In the next scenario, Michigan is enjoying its first warm, spring-like days after a hard winter. Eleven-year-old Bastian has been cooped up in school all week, but he is excited because Friday is a scheduled day off due to a teachers' conference. When Friday comes, Bastian rises early in anticipation of a planned baseball game with his buddies, but to his dismay, he discovers that it is raining. Bastian’s dad sympathizes, but he can’t help. He suggests that Bastian and his friends think of some games they can play inside. Unfortunately, it continues to rain for the rest of the day, as well as on Saturday and Sunday.

Ironically, Monday morning dawns bright and beautiful. When Bastian walks into his classroom, the teacher asks whether he enjoyed his holiday. “No, Miss Jones. I didn’t have any fun,” is Bastian’s response. When Miss Jones asks the reason, Bastian pitifully relates his tale of woe and precipitation. He laments:

*“We couldn’t play baseball at all because the rain lasted for three whole days.”*

Miss Jones recognizes that she has just been presented with a wonderful opportunity to introduce the

concept of active and passive voice to her sixth grade class. After defining the terms, she writes Bastian's sentence on the chalkboard as an example of a well-formed sentence that uses the active voice. She explains that in the case of this particular sentence, there is no corresponding well-formed passive construction. The verb *to last* is "pseudo-transitive," she says, and it only makes sense when used with the active voice because "the statement seems 'frozen'" (Wardaugh 121). To illustrate her point, she changes Bastian's active construction to a passive one, writing:

*"We couldn't play baseball at all because three whole days were lasted by the rain."*

The students are both amused and amazed at the complexities of English grammar and usage. (At least, some of them are.)

## The Passive Voice

At times, the use of the passive voice is preferable, or even necessary, in constructing well-formed sentences. The next scenario demonstrates this point.

### The Case of Mr. Dithers and Dagwood

Quite often, business communication writers use the passive rather than the active voice. One handbook of technical writing advises us to "use the active voice unless there is good reason to use the passive voice" even though "research shows that readers understand active sentences more rapidly than passive ones" (Anderson 272-73). So what would be a "good reason" for using the passive voice in business communications?

Many people believe that the passive voice sounds more authoritative and professional in certain contexts. In addition, since a major objective in business writing is to remove the "I" (that is, to depersonalize text by avoiding statements that can be directly attributed to an individual), the passive construction is often used when communication is generated by "the company" acting as an entity rather than by an individual officer or member of management.

Take the case of Mr. Dithers and Dagwood (Young and LeBrun). It is 2002, and Dagwood works as an electronic engineer for UniDith, Inc., where he designs high-tech widgets for the aerospace industry. Dagwood, whose noontime sandwiches have recently been getting larger, has returned late from lunch the last few days. On Wednesday afternoon, he is disturbed to find an urgent e-mail message waiting for him. The message reads:

*TO: D. Bumstead*

*FROM: Human Resources Department, Disciplinary Action Division*

*It has been noted that your lunch periods have exceeded the allotted half-hour on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of this week. According to the employee handbook, a written warning must be given when an employee exceeds the time allowed for lunch breaks for three consecutive days. If an employee exceeds the time allowed for lunch breaks for five consecutive days, disciplinary action, up to and including termination, will be taken.*

Poor Dagwood. Even though the e-mail message is written completely in the passive voice, it couldn't be more "direct and vigorous." He understands very well that he is in danger of losing his job if he doesn't stop taking long lunch breaks. Anyone who is familiar with today's corporate bureaucracy will immediately recognize the authoritative, impersonal style of Mr. Dithers' writing. However, if this scenario had occurred in Dagwood's traditional era (circa 1948), Mr. Dithers' message would probably have been worded very differently. Dagwood, a "working stiff" employed by J. C. Dithers & Company, is dismayed when his secretary hands him a memorandum from the boss when he returns late from lunch on Wednesday. The memo reads:

*TO: D. Bumstead*

*FROM: J. C. Dithers*

*Bumstead, I've seen you sneaking back into the office late from lunch for the last three days. Don't do it again or I'm going to fire you.*

Dagwood gets the same message each time, but Mr. Dithers' experience in warning his employee is quite different in the second scenario. By using the active voice, the Mr. Dithers of 1948 takes full personal responsibility for the memorandum he sends to Dagwood. He admits, in writing, that it is he who has been witness to Dagwood's tardiness, and that he will personally fire him if he doesn't break the bad habit he seems to be forming.

In contrast, the passive construction used by the Mr. Dithers of 2002 effectively removes him from the messy business of personally confronting Dagwood. In fact, the e-mail message doesn't seem to have been generated by Mr. Dithers (or any other person) at all, but rather by "Human Resources" or even "the employee handbook." Mr. Dithers can deny having anything to do with the message if it becomes necessary to do so. In today's lawsuit-happy society, Mr. Dithers is not only insulating himself from the less pleasant aspects of management, he is covering his backside in case Dagwood eventually seeks legal redress for wrongful termination. The threat of litigation undoubtedly qualifies as a "good reason" for using the passive voice in business communications.

### **So, what's the answer?**

Far from resolving the dilemma over the correct use of active and passive construction in spoken and written communication, this article has the rather frustrating effect of adding to the confusion. "It depends on the sentence and the context" is the only answer that makes sense. It is unfortunate that there is no hard-and-fast rule with regard to voice, but at least we, as communicators, can take some consolation in the fact that this is one grammatical instance when our instincts are usually right.

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