

Who Said That?: or, Why, How, and When to Avoid the Passive Voice

Beyond dead people, writing history and solving murder have a lot in common. Historians and detectives seek to identify the motives, causes, and, above all, parties involved. Given the similarities, imagine the frustrations when historians read this:

A spate of bad decisions were made, leaving the French government no choice but to declare war.

In the example above, who made the decisions in question remains unknown. Poorly written mysteries leave loose-ends untied. So does bad historical writing. Grammarians have a name for the cause of this issue. It's called the "passive voice."

The passive voice is when a writer makes the object of a sentence its subject. This causes two major problems in a sentence: it either hides the actor or adds unnecessary words. Here is an instance of the former.

First Example: John Rawls was traumatized.

This sentence is unclear because its actor is missing. What caused his trauma? A dramatic dream? A drawn-out divorce? A dozen doughnuts? The reader's imagination runs wild.

Second Example: John Rawls was traumatized by the Second World War.

In this sentence, the writer has established what caused the trauma. But "by" is superfluous here. It also renders the sentence less direct than it could be.

Third Example: The Second World War traumatized John Rawls.

By making the Second World War the sentence's subject, readers now know what traumatized Rawls. Plus, since the cause is an event whose dates are well-known, readers also gain a rough estimate of when Rawls was traumatized. The third example, therefore, is more concise than the second and clearer than the first.

Of course, the rules about passive voice use are not absolute. Sometimes, historians cannot identify a specific actor because there are none. When dealing with large, complex forces, historians, such as in the following example, often must use the passive voice to make their case.

By the end of the nineteenth century, India had become increasingly tied to the global economy.

The passive voice, then, must be (largely) eliminated from your essays! Wait, no—*You* must (largely) eliminate the passive voice from your essays! Better.