

“Mistakes Were Made”: The Perils of Writing in the Passive Voice

History professors and teaching assistants frequently encourage students to “write actively” and to “avoid passive voice.” What do they mean?

Most of the time, instructors who cite “passive voice” as a problem in your essay mean they are unclear about *who* or *what* is doing something. Consider the following example in which the subject of the verb is missing:

Example 1: The ball was thrown to Jordy Nelson.

This is an example of a “passive” verb construction. The sentence is grammatically correct, but leaves out important information – in this case, *who* threw the ball to Jordy Nelson. We can re-write this sentence as follows:

Example 2: The ball was thrown to Jordy Nelson by Aaron Rodgers.

This is a bit better. We now know *who* threw the ball. But we could do better. Consider another version written with an “active” construction:

Example 3: Aaron Rodgers threw the ball to Jordy Nelson.

This sentence is clearer and more concise than Examples 1 and 2. It is also more direct. Example 3 is an example of how an “active” verb construction can lead to stronger, clearer writing.

“Active” and “Passive” Voice in Historical Writing

The use of “active” voice is even more important when describing complex historical events, where the identity of the actor is crucial to understanding the historical “cause and effect.” Consider the following example using “passive” voice that one might find in a rough draft of a student’s paper:

Example 5: The growth of major American cities in the late 19th century was impacted by the development of railroads.

This sentence describes a complex phenomenon (what influenced the growth of cities). Part of the job of a historian is to explain such complex processes clearly and precisely. “Active” verb constructions make that job easier. To improve clarity and precision, you could re-write the sentence as follows:

Example 6: The development of railroads impacted the growth of American cities in the late 19th century.

The above sentence provides a clearer connection between the historical “cause” (development of railroads) and “effect” (growth of cities) by placing them in a logical order. Although Examples 5 and 6 convey a similar meaning, most readers will find #6 more clear than #5.

But That’s Not All! Other Reasons to Use “Active” Voice

“Active” verb constructions (where the *who* or *what* that is *doing* something appears at the beginning of the sentence) also allow you to use a wider range of verbs, which can help you be more precise in your writing. Consider the following ways to re-write Example 6:

The development of railroads **fuelled** the growth of American cities in the late 19th century.
The development of railroads **sparked** the growth of American cities in the late 19th century.
The development of railroads **accelerated** the growth of American cities in the late 19th century.
The development of railroads **paralleled** the growth of American cities in the late 19th century.

Each of the verbs in the above sentences lends a slightly different meaning to the sentence, giving you—the writer—more possibilities to explain precisely how the rise of rail transport “impacted” the growth of cities in the late 19th century

You could do the same in most sentences, including the next time you describe Aaron Rodgers throwing to Jordy Nelson.

Aaron Rodgers **fired** the ball the Jordy Nelson
Aaron Rodgers **slung** the ball to Jordy Nelson.
Aaron Rodgers **delivered** the ball the Jordy Nelson.
Aaron Rodgers **pitched** the ball to Jordy Nelson.
Aaron Rodgers **flicked** the ball to Jordy Nelson.
Aaron Rodgers **tossed** the ball to Jordy Nelson.

How to Spot and Fix “Passive” Voice

As you revise a rough draft, look for ways to make your writing more “active” by identifying and eliminating “passive” constructions. The following words and phrases often accompany “passive” verb constructions:

- “by” or “by someone” or “by something” – as in “Lincoln was assassinated *by John Wilkes Booth*”
- “was or were” + past tense of a verb” – as in “The ball *was thrown* to Jordy Nelson” or “mistakes *were made*”

If you see the above words and phrases in your writing, try re-writing the sentence in question by using “active” voice.