

ACTIVE VOICE, PASSIVE VOICE, and NOMINALIZATION

To judge by advice that is often given to developing writers, active voice is somehow far superior to passive voice. Following such advice, though, requires the writer to be able to identify active and passive forms of a finite verb. Even more important is the writer's understanding of the rhetorical impact of these two forms of the verb. Good writers choose active or passive voice based on the impact that they want a sentence as a whole to have on their readers.

In this handout we are going not only to cover the way to spot active and passive verbs, but also to consider the meaning that each form conveys. In addition, into this conversation about active and passive voice we are going to introduce the concept of "nominalization," since the style that some of your instructors would prefer that you avoid is often characterized by nominalization as well as the unadvised use of passive voice.

ACTIVE VOICE

We say that a verb is in the active voice when the **grammatical subject** of the verb is the person or agent responsible for the action expressed by the **verb**:

Bill has jumped over many hurdles.

Kim passed her test.

The rock smashed the car.

The Elks will not hold their annual dance next October.

The committee decided not to grant Sally's request.

PASSIVE VOICE

We say that a verb is in the passive voice when the grammatical subject of the verb is functionally **the object or result of the action** expressed by the verb. The agent or source of the action may be added in a prepositional phrase, but it can be (and often is) omitted.

Many hurdles have been jumped (by **Bill**).

The test was passed.

The car was smashed.

The annual dance will not be held.

Sally's request was not granted.

The passive is formed by the verb *to be* (used as an auxiliary) and the **past participle** of another finite verb.

was passed
will be held
have been jumped
is seen

BE CAREFUL!

Don't assume that you have passive voice any time you see a form of the verb *to be*. Forms of *to be* can act as finite verbs.

Tomorrow **will be** better.
The laws in this land **are** acts passed by the legislative branch.

Here's a test for passive voice:

- A **form of the verb *to be*** is followed by the **past participle** of another finite verb, the participle articulating the action being expressed in the clause;
- The clause can be turned back into the active voice by removing the *to be* auxiliary.

Many hurdles have **been jumped**. (passive voice)
Someone has **jumped** many hurdles. (active voice)

THE RHETORICAL IMPACT OF ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE

When verbs in the active voice express an action, the active voice can paint vivid and immediate pictures of people (or things) doing something.

Similarly, since the doer or agent of the action is the grammatical subject, the source or cause of the action is directly and immediately expressed.

The **engineer failed** to stop the train.
The **senator did not vote** on 80% of the bills on the floor this term.

There are times, however, when the agent or source of an action is not known, or the agent or source is not important. In these cases, passive voice best reflects the focus and intention of the writer.

After the **decision is made**, you have three days to appeal.
Yesterday she reported to the police that **the ring had been stolen**.

Since passive voice allows us to omit the agent or cause of the action, it can also be used when the writer's objective is to avoid assigning (or taking) responsibility.

The task **was never completed**.
Killing civilians **was not intended**.

GRAMMAR AND RHETORIC

To review: grammatically speaking, both active and passive voice are equally legitimate forms of finite verbs. Choosing one or the other, then, is a stylistic or a rhetorical matter. The rhetorical aspect of language refers to the impact that a sentence or segment of text has on an audience. Another way to look at the matter—the syntax or grammatical form of a sentence carries meaning, just the way the words we use in a sentence carry meanings. The good writer wants the syntax of her prose to reinforce the explicit message of her words. Conversely, the syntax of sentences can often reveal the attitude of a speaker/writer, even in those cases in which the writer had no intention of making his attitude obvious.

Unfortunately, there is a body of discourse—too often from the offices of bureaucracies, of academics, of theoreticians—in which complex ideas are made even more difficult to comprehend by the use of a depersonalized and highly abstract style. One feature of this style is often excessive nominalization.

NOMINALIZATION

The concept of nominalization is derived from the fact that many words in English have various grammatical forms, including a noun form and a verb form.

(TO) DECIDE verb

DECISION noun

He **decided** to take the train. (verb)

The **decision** was made yesterday. (noun)

Nominalization occurs when a writer expresses an idea by using the noun form, rather than the verb form, of one of these versatile words. Such constructions often involve using a verb in the passive voice or using a “weak verb” (a linking verb, or verbs like *to have*).

The politician had an **obstruction** of justice situation on his hands.

A rapid **response** to this request is advised.

Joseph Williams’ *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* is an excellent in-depth analysis of nominalization and other stylistic and rhetorical choices, with a focus on those choices that work against the clarity of a piece of prose. Here are some examples he gives of nominalization; contrast them with revisions that aim at expressing the same idea with agent/actors and verbs that express the action under consideration.

Nominalized:

There is a need for an analysis of library use to provide a reliable base for the projections of needed resources.¹

Active:

We need to know which parts of our library are being used most extensively so that we can project what resources are most needed.

Here's another example from Williams (in addition to the nominalization, there are obviously other stylistic infelicities in this passage). See how many nominalizations you can spot, as well as weak verbs or verbs in the passive voice:

The importance of language skills in children's problem-solving ability was stressed by Jones (1985) in his paper on children's thinking. Improvement in nonverbal problem solving was reported to have occurred as a result of improvements in language skills. The use of previously acquired language habits for problem articulation and activation of knowledge previously learned through language are thought to be the cause of better performance. . . .²

Now, compare the original with this revision:

In his paper on children's thinking, Jones (1985) stressed the importance of language skills in accounting for the success children have in solving problems. When children increased their language skills, they simultaneously improved their skills in solving nonverbal problems. Children became better problem-solvers, Jones concludes, because they used language to articulate such problems and because, in using language, they activated knowledge they had previously acquired through language.

If you compare these versions, you can see that nominalizations can turn an active picture (with things or human beings actually doing something) into a static state of being or into an abstraction. As we've already noted, nominalization can also be used to downplay individuals' responsibility for an action, or completely remove human beings or agents of any sort from the picture. It is not unusual to find readers' labeling highly nominalized prose as "dull, dry, and boring."

Most importantly, though, nominalized prose can keep your readers from getting your point! Do you notice that when we turn Jones and children into actors, Jones's point about children's problem-solving makes a lot more sense to us?

¹ Joseph Williams, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, 8th ed. (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2005), Exercise 3.4, #6b, page 44.

² Williams, Exercise 5.2, #3, page 84.