



The Absolutely Positively Definitive Story On Active Voice and Business Writing

We often hear that we should avoid the passive voice in business writing. But what's the big deal?

This article will answer these questions:

- ! What is the active voice?
- ! How do we distinguish active voice from passive voice?
- ! Why do business writers recommend the active voice?
- ! Are there ever occasions when business writers should use the passive voice?

What is the active voice?

When a writer writes a sentence in the active voice, the subject of the sentence will perform an action. When a writer writes a sentence in the passive voice, the verb in the sentence will act upon the subject.

A transitive verb is one that takes a direct object. Sentences with transitive verbs can be written in the active or passive voice. I know this sounds a little academic so I'll make the distinction clear with a simple example.

How do we distinguish active voice from passive voice?

Consider the following sentence:

The letter was delivered.

Did I write this sentence in active voice or passive voice? Notice that I have written this sentence in past tense. (The letter was delivered sometime in the past.) Active voice and passive voice have nothing to do with present tense or past tense. Let me offer three "tests" to determine if a sentence is active or passive.

1. The Martian Test - Can you put "martians" in the sentence? If you can, it is written in the passive voice. This test is not particularly scientific and it does not always work,



but it can help many writers “plug in” to the distinction between active and passive voice. Using my example above, I might ask, “Who delivered the letter?” Was it a martian? If I can put “martians” in my writing in this way, the sentence is written in passive voice.

Note that the “martian test” does not always work. I might have written the sentence to read:

“The letter was delivered by the mailman.”

Now I know that the mailman delivered the letter and I can no longer put “martians” in the sentence. However, the sentence is still in the passive voice. The second and third tests will help you understand why.

2. The “Who’s Doing the Acting” Test - Does the subject act on the verb or is the subject acted upon by the verb? In both:

“The letter was delivered.”

and

“The letter was delivered by the mailman.”

the subject of the sentence is *letter*. The letter, however, is not acting on anything. The letter is being acted upon either by an unknown entity (*martians*) or by the mailman who is stuck at the end of the sentence as the object of the preposition “by”. We make either sentence active voice by putting the actor in front of the verb:

The mailman delivered the letter.

Note that this sentence is still in the past tense but it is now in the active voice. The new subject, “*mailman*” is now acting on the verb; i.e. the mailman is doing the delivering. Sometimes it is necessary to supply a subject for a passive voice sentence in order to make it active.

3. The Absolutely Positively Definitive Test - This is a technical test that never fails to identify passive voice.

Avoid verb constructions that combine forms of the verb “to be” (these forms include *is, was, were, are, am, and being*) with past participles (past tense sounding helping verbs that often end in “ed”).

This test should be evident in our examples above

*The letter **was delivered.***

and



*The letter **was delivered** by the mailman.*

Both sentences combine a form of the verb “to be” (*was*) with a past participle (*delivered*).

This third test is why computer programs that come with word processors are so good at identifying passive voice. They simply search for these constructions. If you can train your eye to see these constructions (or your ear to hear them) you will always be able to identify the passive voice.

Here are some additional examples. The following sentences are all written in the passive voice. The form of “to be” and the past participles are in boldface type to help you identify the problem. Active voice versions of these sentences are at the end of this article.

1. Your proposal will **be considered** by the committee.
2. The analysis **was conducted** by Maria’s department.
3. This medication should **be taken** with meals.
4. These procedures **are not allowed** by Quality Control.

Note also that forms of “to be” without the participles are fine. For example:

Human resource policies are beneficial for everyone.

We call this a “state of being” verb. In the sentence above, *Human resource policies* exist in a “state of being” called “*beneficial*”. State of being verbs are not passive voice.

Why do business writers recommend the active voice?

Okay, we know what active voice is and how to distinguish it from passive voice. So what? Who cares?

Business writers prefer the active voice to the passive voice because active voice registers meaning more clearly and more directly in the mind of the reader. Active voice minimizes confusion. If there is anything business writers want to avoid, it is confused readers. You can see this when you read our two example sentences side by side:

The letter was delivered by the mailman. (passive voice)

The mailman delivered the letter. (active voice)



The active voice is more clear and direct. One or two uses of passive voice in a one-page memo may be no big deal. But if a writer is writing predominately in the passive voice there is a good chance that readers will, at worst, become confused; or, at best, spend far too much energy trying to decipher the writer's intent. I'm sure you'll agree with me that the active voice sentences at the end of this article are more clear and direct than their passive voice counterparts written above.

Are there ever occasions when business writers should use the passive voice?

Yes, there are at least three occasions when I would recommend the passive voice.

1. Bad News - Bad news may best be conveyed in the passive voice. Consider:

I am terminating John's position immediately.

Though this sentence is written in the active voice, it sounds harsh and abrupt. For the sake of tone, it might be better to use the passive construction:

John's position is being terminated immediately.

(By martians, of course.

We never do that sort of thing at Spaulding Associates, Inc.!!!)

2. Hiding Responsibility - Though I'm not recommending that you make this a habit, there may be occasions in business writing when you want to hide or disguise responsibility. When I say:

Third quarter sales projections were not met.

This is in the passive voice. Notice that it also disguises responsibility. Who is responsible for this? Martians?

3. Subject or Actor Does Not Matter - You may want to use a passive construction when the actor in the sentence (or the subject) simply does not matter. If your boss sends you an urgent memo demanding to know if the letter was delivered and seems unconcerned about who the courier was, it may be appropriate to respond:

The letter was delivered.

As a rule, if you do not have a specific reason for writing in the passive voice (as in one of the above three), make the active voice your default writing style. Your business communications will surely be more clear and direct.

And now for those active voice versions of the earlier four sentences:



1. The committee will consider your proposal.
2. Maria's department conducted the analysis.
3. Take the medication with meals.
4. Quality Control does not allow these procedures.

Best wishes for clear writing,

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