

Passive Resistance

This month we'll begin to examine the dreaded critiquing mark of **passive**.

"Passive-ness" has received excessive and perhaps undue scrutiny in the writing community of late. To label a passage as passive has become almost tantamount to calling the writer a terrorist. I won't go so far. Terrorism is a deliberate act, but passivity is more of an unwitting habit. So you're more like an SUV-driving non-recycler.

Let's first make a distinction between **passive voice** and **passive writing**. The latter is a nebulous term that we'll tackle later. For now, we'll define the grammatically-defined concept of passive voice.

A review of middle-school grammar may be helpful here. A verb expresses action. The action may be **transitive** or **intransitive**. An transitive verb requires an **object**—a noun that receives the action. Example:

Agent Pi shattered the safety glass. The mutant monkey leapt into the secret lair.

In the first sentence, shattered is a transitive verb. The object, glass, is an essential part of the sentence. Without it we have:

Agent Pi shattered.

. . . which doesn't make sense (unless Agent Pi happens to be made of porcelain).

What about the second sentence? Don't assume the noun lair is the object of leapt. Note that the preposition into comes between lair and leapt. That makes the noun the **object of a prepositional phrase**, not of a verb. The prepositional phrase is not essential. Remove it and we have:

The mutant monkey leapt.

. . . which is still grammatically correct (if vague).

Our transitive-verb sentence is in **active voice**: the subject performs the action. We can also express it in **passive voice**:

The safety glass was shattered by Agent Pi.

Note that the *subject* (glass) was the *object* in the active-voice sentence. The subject **receives rather than performs the action**.

Notice also that the verb is **past tense, following a form of "to be"** (was, were, has been, will have been, etc.). That's the easiest way to recognize a passive-voice verb.

So, if the active-voice object is the passive-voice subject, what happens to the active-voice subject? In our example, it's become the object—*but not of the verb!* Of the **prepositional phrase**, "*by Agent Pi.*"

And remember how prepositional phrases are removable? It's still correct to say:

The safety glass was shattered.

But wait—does this mean that the sentence doesn't need Agent Pi to shatter the glass? In a way, yes. By making the glass the subject, the writer has implied that **the glass is important—not Agent Pi**.

Plus, even with the prepositional phrase, we don't know who shattered the glass *until after it "happens."* The reader's mind pictures shattering glass and then rewinds the image to make Agent Pi, not the mutant monkey or a freak micrometeorite, responsible.

Therein lies the crux of why editors eschew the passive voice: it tends to slow the reader down. Yes, the reader will probably figure out what you mean, but it might take a second read.

What's the fix?

From this month's example, it probably looks simple. Just do a global search for **by** and flag every occurrence that looks like:

A was/were B-ed by C

Then you can doctor them to:

C B-ed A

But not all passive-voice sentences contain "by." And those that don't can be difficult to detect and even harder to eradicate.

We'll look at that next month.