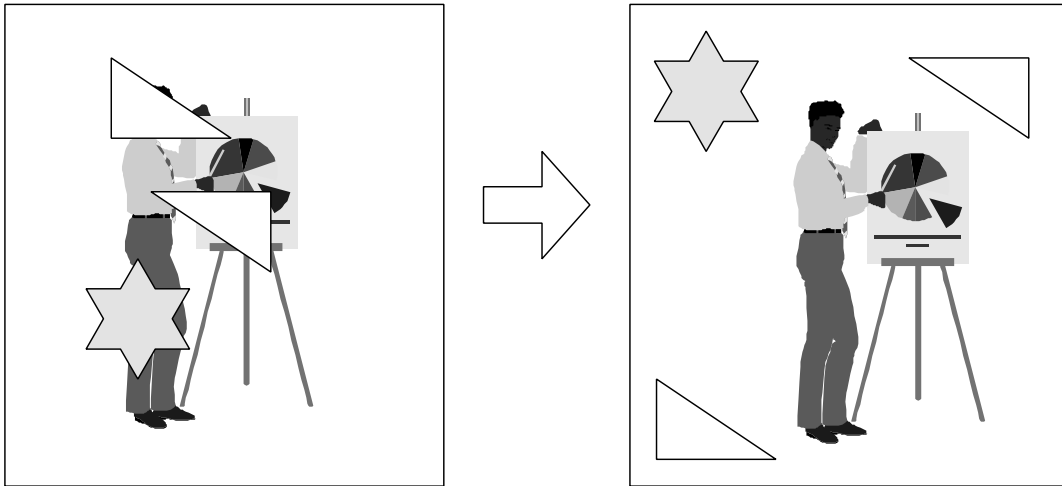


## Surface the Agent and Action, so Users Don't Have to Guess Who Does What



### BACKGROUND |

### Write actively, to speed people's understanding

People habitually think in terms of characters carrying out actions that affect objects or other people. So readers expect this pattern in sentences:

**Character** or actor = Subject

**Action** = Verb

**Object** = Direct object

Williams says readers think prose is clear when:

- (1) The subjects of the sentences name the cast of characters.
- (2) The verbs that go with those subjects name the crucial actions those characters are part of.

(Williams, 1990)

*The interest to myself would seem to have been, as I recover the sense of the time, that of all the impossibilities of action, my proceeding to Cambridge on the very vaguest grounds that probably ever determined a residence there might pass for the least flagrant; as I breathe over again at any rate the comparative confidence in which I so moved I feel it as a confidence in the positive saving virtue of vagueness. Could I but work that force as an ideal I felt it must see me through, for the beauty of it in that form was that it should absolutely superabound. I wouldn't have allowed, either, that it was vaguer to do nothing; for in the first place, just staying at home when everyone was on the move couldn't in any degree show the right mark; to be properly and perfectly vague one had to be vague about something; mere inaction quite lacked the note—it was nothing but definite and dull.*

—Henry James,  
*Notes of a Son and Brother*

But writing in the passive voice turns that pattern on its head. A passive sentence turns the object into a subject, and deletes the true actor, or pushes that person off into a prepositional phrase toward the end of the sentence.

**Active:** The batter hit the ball.

**Passive:** The ball was hit by the batter.

Some readers may actually encode the passive text in active voice, to understand it. Reading a passive sentence like “The chocolate sauce was poured over the raspberry by the chef,” the mind evidently pauses to translate that into “The chef poured chocolate sauce over the raspberry.”

Now the main actor has become the true subject of the sentence, matching the mind’s expectations, and the object of her pouring has ended up where it belongs—as the object of the verb. And the active verb shows us what the lead actor does. The chocolate sauce is no longer acting as if it were the person in charge.

This process of translation adds 25% to the time required to understand the sentence.

Not only do readers move more quickly through active-voice text, but they prefer it and feel more familiar with it. (Spyridakis, 2000)

Of course, some minds just enjoy thinking about chocolate, so those folks may not object to the split seconds devoted to reinterpreting the sentence. And in science, engineering, bureaucracies, and academia, the passive voice sounds sober and professional in research papers. But online, that paper mentality takes too many words, and eats up too much thinking time.

If your users are just going to download and print a document, you don’t need to change the passive voice. But if your audience will try to read the material online, you should transform all those weak-kneed passives into healthy, active sentences.

1. Make the actor the subject (the batter).
2. Change the verb to active voice  
(from “is hit by” to “hits”)
3. Move the object (the ball) after the verb.

## Is *is* OK?

Occasionally, you have to define a term, or create an equation.

Literature is news that stays news.  
(Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*, 1934)

Mediocrity is a handrail.  
(Montesquieu, *Mes pensées*, 1755)

The verb *is* acts as the equal sign. That's OK. The verb *to be* is not, in itself, passive. The passive crops up when you turn the subject into a victim, being operated on by the verb.

## EXAMPLES

### Before

If disks are swapped with others, or picked up at flea markets, it must be noted that viruses could be a problem on the disks; the same is true if disks are received from people whose game software has been downloaded from the Internet, or if software gets loaded on the disk after being downloaded from unknown sites.

### After

A virus could infect your disk if:

- You swap disks with friends.
- You pick up disks at flea markets.
- You receive disks from people who download games from the Internet.
- You download software from people you don't know.

## AUDIENCE FIT

### If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

### How well does this guideline apply?

An occasional passive voice does no one any harm. But get in the habit, and you put your readers to sleep.

TO LEARN

Passives are OK when there is no true subject. Avoid them when you want to help students understand concepts, processes, or ruling principles.

TO ACT

Follow the guideline to be clear. Better yet, write in the imperative. Tell people what to do. Give orders!

TO BE AWARE

Some passives reflect reality. The person does nothing, but is transformed. Still, keep the passives to a minimum.

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

Somehow, folks know you are covering up, exaggerating, or lying when you overuse the passive—they'll say you sound just like a bureaucrat.

**See:** Broadbent (1978), Flower, Hayes, and Swarts (1983), Henning (2001c), Herriot (1970), Horton (1990), Kilian (1999), Kintsch (1993), Miller (1962), Spyridakis (2000), Tarutz (1992), Williams (1990).

For your review only.

Excerpt from *Hot Text: Web Writing that Works*.  
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[theprices@theprices.com](mailto:theprices@theprices.com)

The Prices  
918 La Senda Lane, NW  
Albuquerque, NM 87107

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