



# How passive voice weakens your scholarly argument

Thomas Sigel

*T. Sigel Consulting/Sigel Press, Medina, Ohio, USA*

Received 10 February 2009  
Accepted 11 February 2009

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to convey to authors that, by avoiding passive constructions in scholarly writing, academics can demonstrate a more thorough understanding of materials, thus strengthening arguments and presenting articles with clarity.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Based on 12 years' experience in academic publishing, the author has worked directly with major scholars and global publishing houses to shape and craft scholarly content to meet the needs of customers, namely, academics and students in higher education. The article responds to the complaint that passive voice weakens and muddles scholarly arguments.

**Findings** – The paper provides sound advice on how to structure one's writing in active voice in order to provide a solid, cogent argument that focuses on clarity and precision. It recognises that many scholars bog down their writing with passive voice and offers alternatives to combat passive voice.

**Research limitations/implications** – The paper suggests that scholars utilise active voice in scholarly writing, but it does not imply that one cannot implement passive voice construction in the appropriate context.

**Practical implications** – The study is a very useful guide for academics to help them hone their writing skills in order to produce quality articles that will clearly and cogently convey their scholarly arguments and allow them to stand out in an already crowded market.

**Originality/value** – The paper fulfils an identified information need and offers practical writing advice to academics who will be submitting articles for journal publication, as well as book chapters to academic presses.

**Keywords** Higher education, Research, Publishing

**Paper type** Viewpoint

Traditionally, textbooks and academic journal articles have embraced passive voice, often bogging down the clarity of the discussion and argument. In recent years, one of the biggest complaints from university lecturers and professors to publishing companies is that the language of textbooks is too complex for the average student. Living in a multi-media world, sadly, but realistically, the twenty-first century student learns in sound bytes.

Last year a major global publisher came to me with a dilemma. Customers of a best-selling business book, authored by a famous scholar from an Ivy League institution, complained that the book was too high level. After a quick assessment of the first chapter, I determined that I could easily remedy the situation. The authors wrote the book in passive voice with long, stodgy and tedious sentences. The task was simple. I edited the text and transformed the narrative to active voice. The new edition rolled off the press and customers and students raved about the clarity, conciseness and ease of reading – so much better than the previous edition.

## Defining passive voice

So, what is the passive voice? It is a stylistic issue that pertains to clarity. It is not a grammatical error. Often the use of passive voice can prevent a reader from



---

understanding what you mean. The passive voice entails more than just using a “being” verb. Using “to be” can weaken the impact of your writing. For example:

The only meaningful obstacle to the promotion of inputs on to the wider political agenda is not an intractable sense of what needs to be accomplished . . .

Much clearer is the following construction:

The only meaningful obstacle to the promotion of inputs on to the wider political agenda is not an intractable sense of what lobbying groups need to accomplish . . .

The second sentence clarifies exactly who is involved, thus eliminating the question, “needs to be accomplished by whom?” Is it lobbying groups, grass roots organisations, MPs? The passive construction does not allow us to clearly understand the party involved.

A passive construction occurs when you make the object of an action into the subject of a sentence. That is, whoever or whatever is performing the action is not the grammatical subject of the sentence. Let us examine this passive rephrasing of a familiar nursery rhyme:

The hill was ascended by Jack and Jill.

Jack and Jill are “doing” the action in this sentence. But, they are not in the spot where you would expect the grammatical subject. Instead, the hill is the grammatical subject. The more familiar phrasing, Jack and Jill went up the hill, puts them in the subject position, the position of doing something – Jack and Jill (the actors/doers) go up the hill (the object). We use active verbs to represent that “doing”, whether it is ascending hills, proposing ideas or making arguments.

In spotting passive voice, look for a form of “to be” (is, are, am, was, were, has been, have been, had been, will be, will have been, being) followed by a past participle. A past participle indicates past or completed action or time. It is often called the “ed” form as it is formed by adding d or ed, to the base form of regular verbs; however, it is also formed in various other ways for irregular verbs. To identify passive voice, look for:

form of “to be” + past participle = passive voice.

For example:

Management and business practices within liberal capitalist economies have been criticised by Marxian and Neo-Marxian scholars . . .

A better construction for this sentence is:

Marxian and Neo-Marxian scholars criticise management and business practices within liberal capitalist economies . . .

### **Bogged down**

Passive voice bogs down the narrative and also indicates that the author has not thoroughly thought through his or her discussion. This makes for imprecise arguments. For example:

The process of managing oneself is underpinned by reflecting on what it means to be a leader, and consequently, what is to be done to become a better leader.

Much clearer is:

We underpin the process of managing oneself by reflecting on what it means to be a leader, and consequently, what we must do to become a better leader.

The first sentence lacks precision and connection to context. As a result, the reader questions the writer's understanding of the specifics. From the moment you develop your thesis statement and throughout the article, you must always focus on clarity and precision.

In papers where you discuss the work of an author – e.g. a historian or scholar – you can also strengthen your writing by not relying on passive voice when summarising plots or arguments. Instead of writing:

It is argued that ...

or

Mintzberg is portrayed as ...

or

And then the link between X and Y is made, showing that ...

You can bolster your analysis by explicitly connecting an author with these statements:

Plato argues that ...

Mintzberg portrays the strategy consulting business as ...

Porter draws a link between X and Y to show that ...

By avoiding passive constructions, you can demonstrate a more thorough understanding of the material you discuss. The reader knows precisely what is occurring.

Certainly, there are exceptions in writing when using passive voice. Often, scientific articles will embrace passive voice, the rationale being that it provides an objective tone. Very often, however, in social science and humanities articles, passive voice, in reality, bogs down the article and obscures the meaning. The passive voice affects how the reader understands your argument and content and prevents clear understanding of what you are conveying. With the explosion of information now available in today's digital age, and given the competitive environment to publish or perish, it will be important for you as an academic to hone your writing skills in order to produce quality articles that will clearly and cogently convey your scholarly arguments and allow you to stand out in an already crowded market.

#### **About the author**

Thomas Sigel is Managing Director of T Sigel Consulting and Sigel Press based in Cambridge, UK, and Medina, Ohio. Thomas Sigel can be contacted at: [tsigel@sigelpress.com](mailto:tsigel@sigelpress.com)