

Writing with Clarity: Getting Rid of the Excess Baggage

(Adapted from *Little Brown Handbook, 5th Edition*)

Active/Passive Voice

In the **active voice** of the verb, the subject acts: *I peeled the onions*. In the **passive voice** the subject is acted upon: *The onions were peeled by me*. In the passive voice the actor is either relegated to a phrase (by me) or omitted entirely: *The onions were peeled*.

The passive voice is indirect because it obscures or removes the actor. The active voice is more direct, vigorous, and emphatic. Further, all sentences turn on their verbs, which give sentences their motion, pushing them along—active verbs push harder than passive ones.

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| Passive | For energy conservation it is urged that all lights be turned off when not being used. [Who is urging? Who is to turn the lights off?] |
| Active | To save energy, <i>students should turn off</i> all lights they are not using. |
| Passive | The new outpatient clinic was opened by the hospital administration so that the costs of non-emergency medical care would be reduced. |
| Active | The hospital <i>administration opened</i> the new outpatient clinic to reduce the costs of non-emergency medical care. |

Sometimes the actor is unknown or unimportant, and many technical writers deliberately omit the actor in order to give impersonal emphasis to what is being acted upon. In these cases the passive voice can be useful.

- Example:** Wellington was called the “Iron Duke.”
The mixture was then stirred.
Thousands of people are killed annually in highway accidents.

Except in these situations, however, rely on the active voice. It is economical and creates movement.

Conciseness

Writing concisely means cutting whatever adds nothing to your meaning or the freshness of your writing. Don't worry about conciseness while drafting. But when editing your sentences, locate the forceful and exact words that are essential to your meaning. Cross out all the empty words; cut out repetition that neither clarifies nor emphasizes your meaning; and be sure you have used the most direct grammatical form to express your ideas. Don't sacrifice necessary detail or original expression for mere brevity, however. Concise writing does not waste words but still includes the concrete and specific

details that make meaning clear. In concise writing the length of an expression is appropriate to the thought.

- Weak** In my opinion the competition in the area of grades is distracting. It distracts many students from their goal, which is to obtain an education that is good. There seems to be a belief among a few students that grades are more important than what is measured by them.
- Emphatic** The competition for grades distracts many students from their goal of obtaining a good education. A few students seem to believe that grades are more important than what they measure.

Strong/Weak Verbs

Weak verbs such as "is," "has," and "make" stall sentences. Strong verbs such as "slice" and "dispute" energize sentences, moving them along. Weak verbs usually carry extra baggage, too, such as unneeded prepositional phrases and long, abstract nouns or adjectives.

- Weak** The drillers *made slow advancement*, and costs *were over* \$5 million a day. The slow progress *was worrisome* for some backers.
- Strong** The drillers *advanced* slowly, and costs *topped* \$5 million a day. The slow progress *worried* some backers.

Expletives

Expletive constructions begin with *there is* or *it is* and postpone the sentence subject. They are not only wordy but limp.

- Wordy** *There are more than half a million shareholders who* have invested in the tunnel. It is *they and the banks that* expect to profit when the tunnel opens to trains.
- Concise** *More than half a million shareholders* have invested in the tunnel. *They and the banks* expect to profit when the tunnel opens to trains.