

## Stephen King on Why and How to Avoid Passive Voice

[One] of my pet peeves [has] to do with the most basic level of writing, and I want to get [it] off my chest before we move along. Verbs come in two types, active and passive. With an active verb, the subject of the sentence is doing something. With a passive verb, something is being done *to* the subject of the sentence. The subject is just letting it happen. *You should avoid the passive voice.* I'm not the only one who says so; you can find the same advice in *The Elements of Style*.

Messrs. Strunk and White don't speculate as to why so many writers are attracted to passive verbs, but I'm willing to; I think timid writers like them for the same reason timid lovers like passive partners. The passive voice is safe. There is no troublesome action to contend with; the subject just has to close its eyes and think of England, to paraphrase Queen Victoria. I think unsure writers also feel the passive voice somehow lends their work authority, perhaps even a quality of majesty. If you find instruction manuals and lawyers' torts majestic, I guess it does.

The timid fellow writes **The meeting will be held at seven o'clock** because that somehow says to him, "Put it this way and people will believe *you really know*." Purge this quisling thought! Don't be a muggle! Throw back your shoulders, stick out your chin, and put that meeting in charge! Write **The meeting's at seven**. There, by God! Don't you feel better?

I won't say there's no place for the passive tense. Suppose, for instance, a fellow dies in the kitchen but ends up somewhere else. **The body was carried from the kitchen and placed on the parlor sofa** is a fair way to put this, although "was carried" and "was placed" still irk the shit out of me. I accept them, but I don't embrace them. What I would embrace is **Freddy and Myra carried the body out of the kitchen and laid it on the parlor sofa**. Why does the body have to be the subject of the sentence anyway? It's dead, for Christ's sake! Fuhgeddaboutit!

Two pages of passive voice--just about any business document ever written, in other words, not to mention reams of bad fiction--make me want to scream. It's weak, it's circuitous, and it's frequently tortuous, as well. How about this: **My first kiss will be recalled by me as how my romance with Shayna was begun**. Oh, man--who farted, right? A simpler way to express this idea--sweeter and more forceful, as well--might be this: **My romance with Shayna began with our first kiss. I'll never forget it**. I'm not in love with this because it uses *with* twice in four words, but at least we're out of that awful passive voice.

You might also notice how much simpler the thought is to understand when it's broken up into *two* thoughts. This makes matter easier for the reader, and the reader must always be your main concern; without Constant Reader, you are just a voice quacking in the void. "[Will Strunk] felt that the reader was in serious trouble most of the time," E.B. White writes in his introduction to *The Elements of Style*, "a man floundering in a swamp, and that it is the duty of anyone trying to write English to drain this swamp quickly and get the man up on dry ground, or at least throw him a rope." And remember: **The writer threw the rope**, not **The rope was thrown by the writer**. Please, oh please!

**King, Stephen. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. NY: Simon and Schuster, 2000. pp. 122-4.**