POINT OF VIEW

Passive Is Spoken Here

By WILLIAM GERMANO

Silver spoons, real ones anyway, owe a lot of their charm to the hallmarks on the back of the stem. Academic writing has its own system of validation, its own hallmarks, and one is the passive voice. This is a strange development, considering how vigilant we are about overuse of the passive when we teach writing, and how insistent writing guides can be on this point. "Whenever you come across a passive in your writing, recast the sentence with an active verb instead." The examples tend to feature painful structures followed by why-didn't-I-think-of-that transformations. "When the book had been read by the class, the next lesson was presented by the teacher" becomes "When the students had read the book, the teacher presented the lesson." Yet it's difficult to convince academic writers that avoiding the passive is a piece of advice meant for *them.*

In weak academic writing, passives are everywhere. (I might have said "passives are frequently used," but I wanted an active verb here.) If you were reading a poorly written letter or a grade-school composition, you might think that the writer simply didn't have sufficient command to write in direct and vivid terms. He might even have been aware of his limitations, embarrassed by the idea of expressing his opinion in a naked way, and taking refuge behind the curtain of the passive.

By the time a graduate has waded into the thick of a Ph.D. program and is toiling on the dissertation, the student's printer has spit out a lot of term papers. By that point, unlearned writing lessons have become writing habits, and those habits have, in turn, become his characteristic way of expressing ideas. He has grown used to -- even fond of -- them. (I find it unsurprisingly easy to view the weaknesses in my own writing as being part of my style.) For graduate students, however, more is at stake. Years of abusing the passive have encouraged those students to believe that the passive is, after all, the voice of academe. "So," the new scholar reasons, "if this is how the scholarly world speaks -- or rather, if this is the language spoken in the scholarly world -- then that's the way I'll write my first book." And lo, thus is the book written.

The passive voice does two things at once, and those two things at first seem contradictory. First, the passive conceals agency, or responsibility for action. "The overthrow of the country's tottering regime was undertaken by the forces of the Army of Liberation in the late spring of 1963." Let's let that Army take responsibility for its actions: "Late in the spring of 1963 the Army of Liberation overthrew the country's tottering regime." Suddenly, the Army of Liberation did it.

There's concealment at work here, too. The passive construction distances the writer from the act of making a statement. Take away the passive, and the writer -- like the Army of Liberation -- has suddenly done something of consequence: He's made a declaration. He's said something. You don't have to be an expert in linguistics to know that this is not the same thing as "something was said." But too many dissertations are written in an imaginary world where objects have

things done to them and countries are invaded, characters are depicted while results are secured. It's not that the passive is a criminal offense for writers. There are plenty of places where passive constructions feel right. (Use them there.) Prose stripped entirely of passives can feel overly energetic, like a kindergarten class at recess. "Calm down!" you want to say. Of course, it's important to draw a distinction between writing *with* the passive voice and writing *in* the passive voice. In the first case, the writer uses the passive when it's necessary. In control of her prose, she enjoys the way the passive voice lends variety to her sentences, yet she remains the boss in her own paragraphs. On the other hand, someone who writes *in* the passive hopes no one will notice that she's there. The passive is a cozy place to hide.

Writing can be like going through customs. "Anything to declare?" asks a flinty-eyed customs officer. Most people rely on a cheerful smile and a shake of the head, hoping there won't be any questions about the extra bottle of wine or the embroidered tablecloth. Most academic writing hopes to slither through customs. Instead of a smile, scholarly writers too often depend on the passive, fearful that a direct statement might open them to equally direct inspection.

Yet strangely, the second thing the passive voice does for academic writing is to *claim* authority. It's an authority based not on accumulated research or the wisdom of experience, at least not in the case of most dissertations, but on an appeal to the power of passivity. To use the passive is to call up the authority of one's discipline and the scholars who have gone before. There's nothing wrong with wanting to do this, but the passive can't get you there all by itself. Academic writers -- particularly young academic writers -- use the passive to lend credibility to their writing. "Domestic arrangements in 16th-century Lancashire households were often made by the eldest daughter." Domestic arrangements are in charge of this sentence, while the writer's point appears to be that the eldest daughter of the household looked after things. In its Olympian calm, the passive asserts -- even demands -- that the reader agree.

Nevertheless, this sentence is nervous about its own claims, as the telltale word "often" makes clear. Was the eldest daughter in charge or wasn't she? Is the writer making an important and original claim about family relationships or just serving up someone else's research nugget? If it's an original idea, it's too compressed to be clear, too wimpy to be convincing. A bit better: "My research reveals the surprising fact that the eldest daughter was responsible for domestic arrangements in most 16th-century Lancashire households." ("Most" is quantitative and useful here; "often" is a fudge.) If it's someone else's thought and worth paraphrasing, the point needs sharpening. "As Henry Pismire has pointed out, in almost half the 16th-century Lancashire households for which we have records, the eldest daughter was responsible for domestic arrangements." Better because clearer.

The active voice should be a kind of scholarly credo: I did research, I drew conclusions, I found this out. That's rarely what we get. How much more often do we read that research is conducted, conclusions are drawn, findings are found out? I sometimes imagine a scholar sitting down with a great idea, then staring at his laptop and exclaiming "Are you crazy? You can't say that -- " and clicking the toolbar to call up Active-Voice-Replace, instantly turning every "I found" into "It was discovered."

The passive is a buffer, not only between the reader and the writer, but between the writer and

her own ideas. I wonder if anyone experiences the world as a series of passive engagements. ("Yesterday, as the garden path was being trod by my feet, a beautiful butterfly was seen by my eye." Which sounds like a case for Dr. Oliver Sacks.) Academic writing often places the reader in just such a world, one where no feet cross any paths, no eye sees any butterfly. It's particularly critical for young scholars to understand that all this bother about the passive voice isn't simply a matter of making sentences lively, peppy, or more engaging. Yes, the active voice is stronger. Readers listen more attentively because they can hear another human trying to engage their attention. But for scholars, the active-passive conundrum should be so much more. The active voice says "I have something to say, and I'm going to say it. If I'm wrong, argue with me in print. But take me at my worth."

Dickens opens *David Copperfield* with a question that arrests me each time I come across it. "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show." He even uses a passive. And he gives us one of the Big Lessons, smack on the first page. All writing -- even the humble dissertation -- is *always about the writer.* Even in scholarly work, a writer is very much present, more subtly than in Nabokov or Beckett, perhaps, but present nonetheless. Every scholar, even the graduate student writing a dissertation, should strive to be the hero of her or his own work, taking command not only of the details but of the voice that presents them, knowing when to appear and when to step aside, how to attract the reader's attention and how to deflect it. In doing so, the scholarly writer becomes responsible for what "these pages must show," a world of causality and motivation where arguments are logical and evidence is clearly presented, a world where nouns noun and verbs verb.

To make writing work, you need to make the parts of writing -- including the bossy, self-denying passive voice -- work for you. If your scholarly project was worth writing, it's because you found a path you had to follow, and on the way you came upon something you want to tell others about. Do that. And just be glad you never had to read a poem that began "Arms and the man are being sung by me" or a novel that opened "Ishmael is what I'm called."

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