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The voice of the people is the voice of God [Vox populi vox dei].

—Alcuin, *Letter to Charlemagne*

God is a verb.

—R. Buckminster Fuller, *No More Secondhand God*

4 Active Voice, Action Verbs

The use of active voice may well be the least understood element of English that most people think they understand. Students understand even less when they get the use of active voice confused with the use of action verbs. And many do. I've even known editors who can't keep them straight.

Fact is, they aren't even related. They just sound as if they are. A sentence written in active voice can include a being verb. And a sentence written in passive voice can include an action verb.

Active voice and action verbs do have one thing in common. They contribute to the strong, honest, direct writing that this book promotes.

Active Voice versus Passive Voice

Active voice means that the subject of the sentence is creating the action of the sentence. It is the exact opposite of the time-honored sentence wrecker known as passive voice. Here's an example of active voice:

The man bit the dog.

The man is the subject of the sentence. The man is doing the action. Therefore, the sentence is in active voice. Here's the same sentence in passive voice.

The dog was bitten by the man.

Now the subject has switched. Now the dog takes on that role. But the dog is not doing the action. The dog is the receiver of the action. That's passive voice.

Notice that the addition of a being verb, "was," and a preposition, "by," has made the sentence longer, 40 percent longer. That is not an unusual increase, and it is one reason good writers avoid using passive voice when they can. But at least two other reasons exist for using active voice whenever possible.

Take a convoluted sentence that seems to start off in several directions and end up going nowhere. Take a close look at it, and chances are the writer began writing in passive voice.

Another reason for using active voice is that it is more honest. It takes responsibility. Passive voice is a way to avoid responsibility. At least two recent U.S. presidents—Ronald Reagan, a Republican, and Bill Clinton, a Democrat—have used the identical passive-voice phrase in an attempt to deflect criticism and embarrassment:

Mistakes were made.

Translation: I'm finally getting around to acknowledging that something was done that was wrong—but it wasn't my fault. I didn't do it.

In their book on grammar for journalists, *When Words Collide*, Lauren Kessler and Duncan McDonald give two situations in which passive voice must be used. First, passive voice is justified if the receiver of the action is more important than the creator of the action. They use this example:

A priceless Rembrandt painting was stolen from the Metropolitan Museum of Art yesterday by three men posing as janitors.

In this case, the Rembrandt should remain the subject of the sentence even though it is the recipient of the action. It's obviously more important—more newsworthy—than the three men who stole it.

Kessler and McDonald's second situation for using passive voice is if the writer has no choice. That's when the writer does not know who or what the actor, the creator of the action, is. The example they use:

The cargo was damaged during the trans-Atlantic flight.

Air turbulence? Sabotage? Was the cargo strapped in properly? The writer doesn't know, so the voice is passive.

One final, rather specialized note: When reporting a police or court event, the word "charged" usually must be used in passive voice. You can say police charged a woman with murder, but it isn't actually the police who are doing the charging. Charging is a process that involves prosecutors—district attorneys or states' attorneys or their assistants. Since the journalist often does not know exactly who is doing the charging, it is consider proper to say, "The woman was charged. ..."

Use Active Voice

You're driving to work, and it is announced on the radio that the company you work for is completely breaking apart.

("Completely" is redundant.)

You're driving to work, and the radio news report announces that the company you work for is breaking apart.

State lotteries are used to fund education.

State lotteries support education.

When examined in independent university studies with other leading cellular industry products, its high-efficiency design has been scientifically proven to reduce dropped calls and failed call attempts.

Independent university researchers compared it with other leading cellular products. They proved that its efficient design reduced dropped calls and failed call attempts.

The previous summer was spent at Mobil Corp.

He spent the previous summer at Mobil Corp.

By using chemicals and preserving the corpse at low temperatures, the necessary tests were conducted.

Pathologists preserved the corpse at low temperatures and used chemicals to conduct the necessary tests.

She was called into her supervisor's office.

Her supervisor called her into her office.

Each week a different theme would be supported for a different cosmetic brand.

Each week a new theme would support a new cosmetic brand.

Of Action Verbs and Imagery

Technically, action verbs and their opposites, being verbs, don't exist. What writers informally call action verbs, grammarians divide into two categories, transitive verbs—which move the action from the subject to the object—and intransitive verbs, which sound active but have no object. And what writers call being verbs, grammarians call linking verbs, because they link the subject with another word to describe a state of being.

Although it isn't a bad idea to become familiar with the nuances of intransitive, transitive and linking verbs, it is enough for a practical writer to know that action verbs do things, but being verbs simply are. Since action verbs add energy to sentences and being verbs don't, good writers prefer action verbs.

To Be or Not

Being verbs are, or they were or they have been. But they simply won't do. Here's an example:

Major league baseball was the first sports organization to institute the concept of free agency for its players.

(This sentence is also wordy.)

Major league baseball became the first sports organization to create free agency.

Action verbs serve no greater service to the English language than when they take the place of a noun that just sits there as the reflection (the *predicate nominative*, as grammarians call it) of the subject and the beneficiary of a being verb.

He is the editor of two magazines.

(He edits two magazines.)

Officials of the Air Line Pilots Association and United Airlines expressed satisfaction Friday with the almost unanimous vote by pilots in favor of a four-year wage agreement with the airline.

Officials of the Air Line Pilots Association and United Airlines both said Friday they are glad pilots voted for a four-year wage agreement.

She is a self-proclaimed renaissance woman.

She calls herself a renaissance woman.

She is still in need of instruction and practice.

She still needs instruction and practice.

The following example obviously has more going against it than the need for an action verb, but let's pick through it and see if we can make the sentence make sense:

Officials with the Attorney Registration and Disciplinary Committee have said similar representations of tax clients in which city elected officials opposed the city, even indirectly, have been found against legal ethics.

Officials of the Attorney Registration and Disciplinary Committee cite similar cases. When lawyers who hold civic office file legal action against the city, they have been found to violate legal ethics—even if their involvement in the lawsuits is indirect.

But wait. Chapters like this one, Chapter 3 and Chapter 7 are by their nature punitive and restrictive. If taken too literally and thoroughly, they can kill the creativity that even a journalist should be able to call on.

One of the early 20th century's great wordsmiths, the flawed genius H.L. Mencken, put it this way in *A Book of Prefaces*:

To the man with an ear for verbal delicacies—the man who searches painfully for the perfect word, and puts the way of saying a thing above the thing said—there is in writing the constant joy of sudden discovery, of happy accident.

The key here is that the content reigns, the “thing said” should always outrank the “way of saying it.” And writers should never get so