



## ACTIVE VOICE

### How it works:

The Active Voice describes a sentence structure in which the subject of the sentence takes action rather than simply being acted upon (“The man was drenched by the rain.”)

The active version here would be, “The man stood in a drenching rain” or “Rain drenched the man.”

### Why it matters:

Many writing instructors speak of the Active Voice in terms of its effect on a reader. They do so correctly. The Active Voice drives a reader from one sentence to the next by framing each sentence as a dynamic action taken by the sentence’s subject. This use of voice also – and I contend, more importantly – affects the writer.

By escalating every sentence into the Active Voice, the writer forces him/herself to find the right verb. The right verb in a sentence reduces and often eliminates the need for additional description. A child trudging through the snow holds as much information as a child who was walking through the snow slowly and with great effort. While the child might walk through the snow (active voice) and still require the description, the shift to active voice reveals the weakness of the verb and demands further examination for clarity. Frequently, when narrative description feels necessary a simple shift to the active voice reveals the need for a stronger, more evocative verb.

Also, by continuing to write sentence upon sentence in the Active Voice, the writer propels him/herself from one to the next in the same way that the imagined reader will eventually be drawn forward through the story.

### Why we find it so difficult to remain in the Active Voice:

Our culture, our society, our fundamental indoctrination trains us to think and to behave passively. From the first time somebody asked us what we wanted to *be* when we grew up instead of what we wanted to *do* we learned at an unconscious level to expect, to anticipate stasis. The question of what one hopes to be implies the wearing of a costume, the carriage of a title perhaps, but not the action of a contributing, active individual. “Being a doctor” summons images of wearing a white lab coat, of a stethoscope draped around the neck. “Healing people”



summons images of hands pressed against bleeding wounds, of urgent movement and caring gestures. “Being a doctor,” ends the conversation with a shorthand about the costume and the state of being. “Healing people,” begins a conversation, drives a conversation, raises questions: physically or psychologically or emotionally? What people? Why do they require healing? Healing is active. Being is inherently passive.

[“She is a doctor,” does not actually qualify as the passive voice. Use of the verb “to be” – “is”, “are,” “am” and so on – whether standing alone or as a helping verb with a participle – “is standing,” “are watching,” “were considering,” – tends to soften the action. People who stand are more active than people who are standing. Those who watch do so more actively than those who are watching.]

Once we begin to write in the Active Voice, we begin to think in the Active Voice. Only then can we begin to *live* in the active voice, making decisions based on how we wish to direct our energy rather than thinking in terms of how or what we want to be, or thinking of ourselves as acted upon by outside forces.

Think of the active voice as powerful tool in the battle against intellectual inertia.

#### ACTIVE VOICE DRILLS

Write five simple sentences in the active voice using verbs you do not remember ever having put to the page before

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Write three sentences in the active voice in the PAST TENSE

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Write two sentences in the active voice in the PRESENT TENSE (I put this last because many people shift into the present tense unconsciously when they begin writing sentences in the active voice. If that happened to you in the last exercise, rework those sentences into the past or future tense and then proceed)

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