

Clarity and Concision Part II: Passive Voice

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What is the passive voice?

- Passive voice occurs when the subject of the sentence is acted *upon*, as opposed to being the actor.
 - The boy threw the ball. (active because the subject (boy) does the action (threw)).
 - The ball was thrown by the boy. (passive because the subject (ball) was acted upon (the boy threw it)).
- Passive voice is not grammatically wrong, but it is a stylistic choice effective writers consciously make.

To Consider

- Often, active voice makes sentences clearer and stronger.
 - Using passive voice can also obscure responsibility, as in the following example:
 - Many officials were bribed.
- vs.
- Escobar bribed many officials.

Another example (from Stephen King's *On Writing*)

▶ “The body was carried from the kitchen and placed on the parlor sofa.”

Passive Voice

▶ Vs.

▶ “Freddy and Myra carried the body out of the kitchen and laid it on the parlor sofa.”

Active Voice

An Important Note...

- In some cases, the passive voice is more appropriate.
 - A chemical solution was added to the specimen.
- ▶ “Approximately **25 percent of verbs in academic writing are in the passive voice** (Biber et al., 1999)” (Caplan 93).
- ▶ Increasingly, though, some journals encourage use of the active voice, even if it means using first person. However, many scientific journals still prefer the passive voice for describing methods of research and analysis of results:
 - ▶ **We hope** that our model will inform the fields of biodiversity monitoring, biological research, and science education.
 - ▶ All data **were analyzed** in two ways.
 - ▶ A needs assessment survey **was conducted**.

More Examples of the Passive Voice in Academic Writing

- ▶ [version of verb “be”]+[past participle]
 - ▶ The study **was completed** in 2009.
 - ▶ Since then, new regulations **have been implemented**. (present perfect passive)
- ▶ It is thought that the plague killed 25 percent of Europeans in the 14th century.
 - ▶ Or The plague is thought to have killed 25 percent of Europeans in the 14th century.
- ▶ Do your “homework” before submitting to journals: look for style sheets and recent publications

A Final Word on Conventions of Discipline

In the hard sciences and some social sciences...

While most science writing is in active voice, some journals prefer methods or results written in passive. However, this continues to change as many journals shift toward continuous active voice through the article. As a best practice, aim for active voice while writing and revising unless you know that passive voice is required for specific fields or journals.

In the humanities and some social sciences...

Narrative writing is usually more appropriate because these fields are more likely than the sciences to be interested in WHO carried out an action. Since an active voice is usually clearer and stronger, it is still often in your best interest to write in active voice unless passive voice is stylistically necessary.

Revising for Passive Voice

- ▶ When you find passive voice, ask yourself if the agent/actor or the receiver of the action is most important.
- ▶ Sometimes the passive voice simply makes the sentence's information easier to follow.
- ▶ Of course, as the author, it may be hard for you to recognize which sentence works better, so, again, we encourage you to participate in peer review with a trusted reader (like a Writing Center consultant!). :)



Finding the Passive Voice

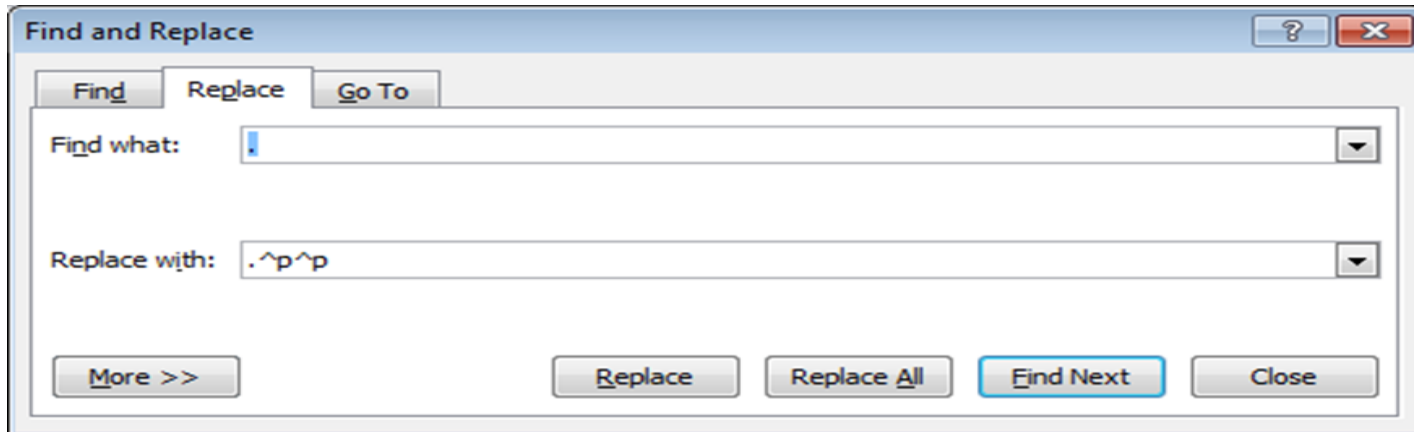
- **Don't:**
 - Assume your word processor will find all instances of passive voice
- **Do:**
 - Ask yourself, “Who or what is doing action? Who or what is being acted upon?” Which is the focus of this sentence?
 - Look for versions of “to be,” such as *was*, *am*, *were*, *are*, and *been*. However, just because a sentence contains one of these words does not mean the sentence is necessarily passive or needs to be revised.
 - Look for phrases beginning with “by,” but know that this will not always mean a sentence is in the passive voice.
 - The comments section was left blank by the majority of survey participants. (passive because the action (or, in this case, lack of action) was done by the majority of survey participants)
 - Most survey participants felt bored by the time they reached the comments section. (active because the actors (most survey participants) are the subject of the sentence. “By” only acts as a preposition telling us when something happened.)

Editing Tips



- Always take a break from your work. Give your brain a rest!
- Read your paper out loud. Seriously. Do it. This helps you slow down and to hear what your writing sounds like. If you become confused or run out of breath while reading your own work, it's a good sign you need to rewrite or shorten a sentence!
- Read your paper backwards (start with the last sentence). This helps your brain slow down and look at each sentence on its own.
- Read your work on a different medium (i.e. paper vs. screen) or change font.
- Seek out low-stakes peer review opportunities.

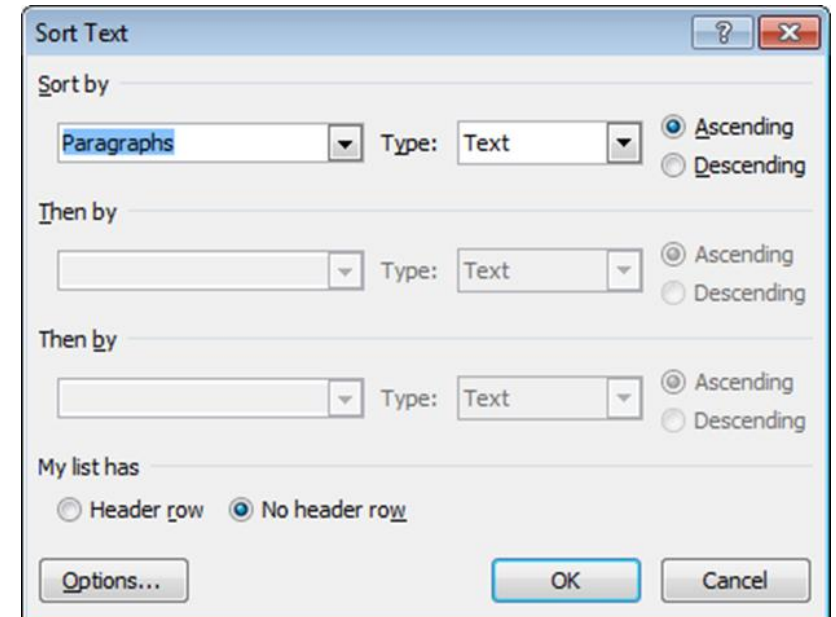
Another way to make your writing easier to proofread



2. Use “sort” feature to arrange sentences in alphabetical order.



1. Use “replace” feature to make periods signal a new paragraph.



Time to practice
with your own
writing!



And test your understanding with
our exercises in part four of this
series!



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Educational Resources for Writing from beyond UGA

- ▶ [UNC Chapel Hill's Writing Center: Tips and Tools](#)
- ▶ [Purdue Writing Lab](#)
- ▶ [Naval Post Graduate Writing Center](#)
- ▶ [Writing Commons](#)

Works Cited and Consulted

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- ▶ King, Stephen. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. Simon & Schuster, 2000.
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