

# Cutting the Passive Voice

by Dianne E. Butts

“Cut the passive voice.”

The workshop leader at the writer’s conference assured us this would improve our writing.

*Cut the* what? I wondered.

When I returned home I dusted off old college grammar books, determined to study this thing called “passive voice.” As I did, I discovered the workshop leader gave us excellent advice.

I found passive voice is easy to recognize and cut from my writing. I also learned removing it breathes life and flare into my work. Eliminating passive voice pares excessive words from the piece and causes the words to race along through *action*.

Passive voice almost always uses a form of the verb “to be.” “To be” indicates an object “is”—it simply exists. There is no action, therefore the sentence is passive, or is said to be in “passive voice.”

The forms of the verb “to be” are: is, are, was, were, am, be, been, and being. Forms of “to be” can also hide in contractions such as it’s, they’re, you’re, wasn’t, weren’t, and aren’t.

Passive voice dulls writing in three ways. First, action comes through the verbs, pushing the story onward and pulling the reader along. Passive verbs provide no action. No pushing. No pulling. So the action slows or stops.

Second, passive voice generally requires more words, which slow down the action. Just as a pot of simmering soup becomes more flavorful and potent as excess water boils off, so our writing becomes more intense and sharp as we “boil off” excess words. Flavorful, potent, intense, sharp writing is something readers like and editors love.

Third, passive voice obscures or omits the actor and therefore, is less direct and often vague or confusing. Active voice, on the other hand, is direct and dynamic.

To cut passive voice from your writing, start by identifying every occurrence of a passive verb in your manuscript. I check my work for passive voice as one of my final editing steps. If I’m working on a long work like a novel, I break it up into manageable pieces, such as doing one scene or chapter at a time.

If you’re working with a hard copy (on paper), use the list of “to be” verbs provided above and circle every form of the verb

throughout your manuscript.

If you’re working on a computer or word processor, use the “search” function to search for each form of the verb “to be.” For example, search for every occurrence of the word “be.” Then search for “am,” then “is,” and so on until you have found every occurrence of passive voice. Don’t forget to search for contractions such as “re” and “s” (although “s” sometimes indicates the possessive, not passive).

Computer user’s hint: Placing a space before the word you’re searching for will cut down on false findings like the “is” in “this.” Placing a space after the word avoids stopping at the “be” in “become,” but realize you might miss passive verbs followed by a period or comma.

Where you find a passive verb, you’ll often find groups of letters, words or phrases that will provide hints to help you change the sentence from passive to active voice. Here are four ways to cut passive voice:

## 1. Look for “ing.”

The sentence, “They are watching,” uses the passive verb “are.” Use the “ing” word as your verb and say, “They watch.”

Note that your three-word sentence became two words.

## 2. Change the noun to a verb.

The sentence, “I am a teacher,” uses the passive verb “am.” Change the noun “teacher” to an active verb and say, “I teach.”

Note that it only took half as many words.

## 3. Watch for sentences or phrases beginning with “there” or “it” plus a form of the verb “to be.”

Instead of using the passive verb “are” in a sentence such as “There are things we can do about passive voice,” say, “We can change passive voice.”

Note that with this “change” the sentence became more positive and forceful, we removed the vague word “things,” and we cut the sentence length in half.

## 4. Look for “by.”

The sentence, “The book was written by him,” uses the passive verb “was.” Using the word “by” to tack “him” onto the end of the sentence obscures the actor. We could even omit “him” entirely by saying, “The book was written.”

This type of sentence construction can become awkward or confusing. Rearrange the sentence by moving the actor closer to the action and say, “He wrote the book.”

Again, the active sentence uses fewer words than the original.

You may wonder, is it ever okay to use passive voice? Yes, sometimes we need passive voice—anything else won’t communicate what we need to say. Questions, for example, often use passive voice, like the one that began this paragraph.

Other times we will choose passive voice because it organizes the sentence in a way that places the emphasis where we want it. For example, I constructed the final sentence in my soup analogy above with passive voice in order to emphasize what “editors love” by placing those words at the end of the sentence.

As a general rule, use passive voice when you must—but the less you use it, the better your writing will become.

## It Was a Dark and Stormy Night... An Exercise in Cutting Passive Voice

“Peanuts” fans know Snoopy is an aspiring writer. He usually begins his stories with: “It was a dark and stormy night...” Instead of opening his story with passive voice, Snoopy’s editor might prefer an active sentence.

Using the four ways to cut passive voice described in the article, see if you can rewrite these sentences in active voice:

“It was a dark and stormy night. Lightning was dancing through the dark, and the sky was being lit up by it. The claps of thunder were deafening. The rain was pounding.

“Snoopy was the only guard around. The doghouse had been deserted by him. There was a forest beyond the backyard. Snoopy was barking at it when suddenly, a shot rang out...”

Here’s how I cut the passive voice. Look how it brings the passage to life:

“Lightning crackled through the air, ripped the dark fabric of the night sky, and set aglow the haunted image of the deserted doghouse. From the nearby woods, beyond the safe tree-lined border of the backyard, above the deafening clap of thunder, amidst the relentless pounding of the midnight rain, accompanied only by the mournful baying of a lone beagle, a shot rang through the night...”

Well, how would *you* rewrite Snoopy’s opening?