

To:
From: D. Kaiser

Passive Voice in Prose

In reading your papers, I noticed frequent dependence upon the passive voice, a feature I regularly noted and urged you to avoid. You may not recognize the passive, or know why it is undesirable. Consequently, I want to illustrate for you the passive voice, then explain why you should avoid it.

An example:

“This blind devotion to the king was seriously challenged by the writers of the Enlightenment.”

There is nothing wrong with this sentence, except that it is wordier than necessary, and it delays the important information until the end of the sentence. That is, we do not learn WHO challenged devotion until the end. Consequently, were the sentence rewritten more economically, the subject (which is the AGENT of the action) would appear first; furthermore, the writer could eliminate the additional preposition and the compound verb.

“Writers of the Enlightenment seriously challenged blind devotion to the king.”

One virtue, therefore, of the active voice is that it is more economical and more powerful.

A further advantage of the active voice is that it obliges the writer to identify the subject, something which the passive voice may obscure, since some passive constructions do not even require an agent. For example:

“The old order, founded on the principles of birth, was overturned and thrown out for the new principles of property. These principles were defined differently, depending upon the interests of the governing body or dominating group.”

Notice that the writer did not identify WHO overturned the old order nor WHO defined the principles differently. Consequently, the passive voice often leads to murky, unclear prose which is, of course, undesirable. Since you are writing to communicate, you want to avoid those structures that hinder communication. Furthermore, employing the active voice whenever possible obliges you to know what you are talking about, encourages clear “pre-thinking,” as McCrimmon calls it.