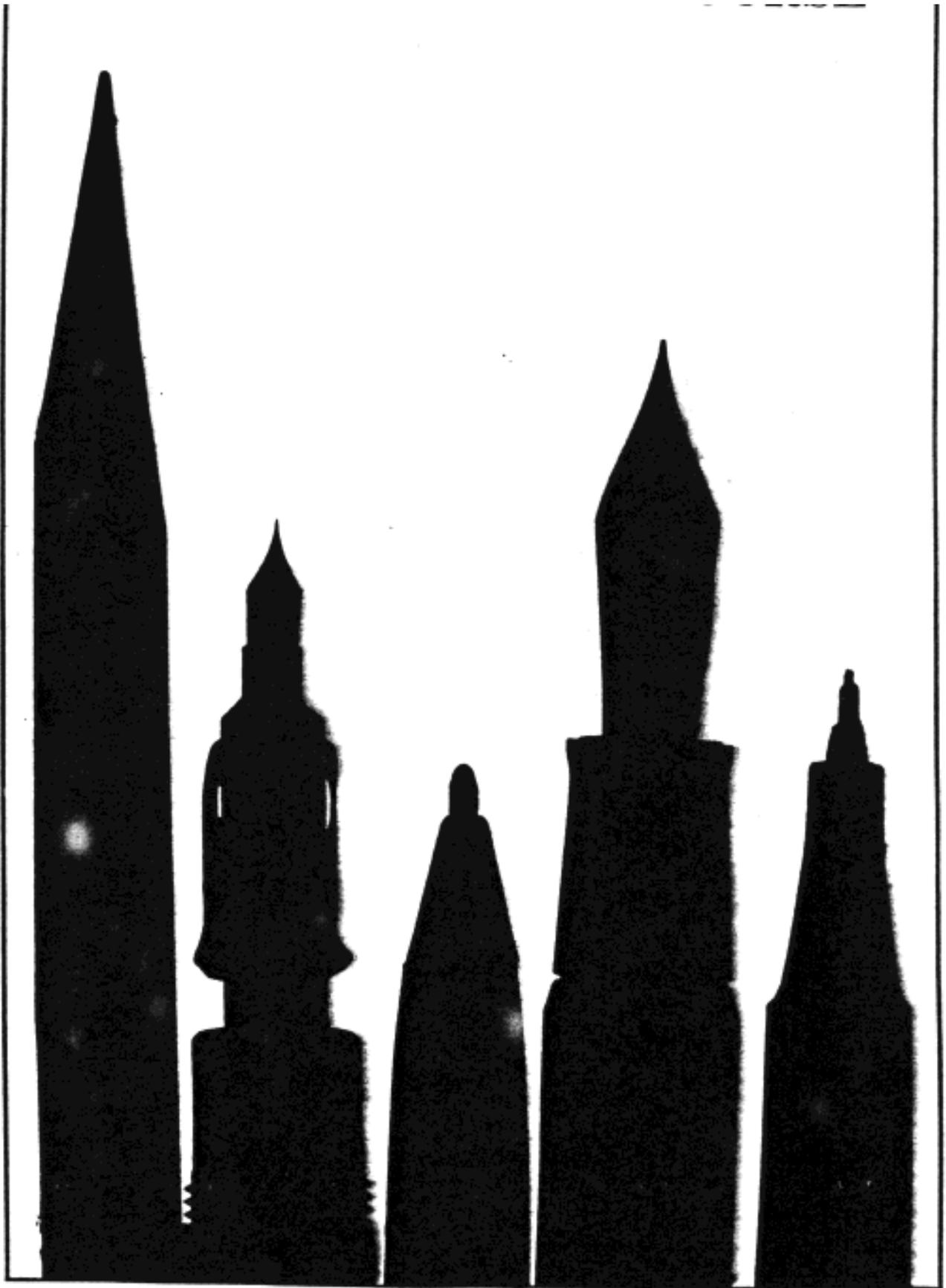


UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY
EXECUTIVE WRITING COURSE



ACTIVE WRITING

Passive writing is wordy, roundabout, and sometimes downright confusing. To avoid this infectious disease, learn how to spot passive verbs and make them active. Most of your sentences should use a who-does-what order. By leading with the doer, you automatically will avoid a passive verb.

Doctor: When did you first notice your use of verbs in the passive voice?

Patient: The utilization was first noticed by me shortly after the military was entered. A civilian agency has been joined by my brother. The same condition has been remarked on by him

Doctor: Did you know that most of the verbs we speak with are active? So are most of the verbs in newspapers and magazines, the kinds of writing we like to read.

Patient: Well, it is believed by me that many verbs are made passive by military writers. In the letters and directives that have been prepared by this speaker, passive verbs have been utilized extensively. Are problems caused?

If you heard the unnatural sound of the patient's passives and know how to lead with doers, you needn't read on. But the following technical discussion may be helpful.

Learn the Symptoms of Passive Voice

A verb in the passive voice uses any form of to be plus the past participle of a main verb:

am is was were be being been

PLUS

a main verb usually ending in en or ed

Unlike sentences with active verbs, sentences with passives don't need to show who or what has done the verb's action. If a doer appears at all, it follows the verb. But most passives in military writing just imply the doer, a severe problem when the doer isn't clear from the context. Passive verbs look like the following underlined words:

Ex: As a result of what has been learned, it is desired that additional equipment testing be made.

(Be made is passive. The past participle of to make is irregular.)

Ex: Two units of blood were ordered for an emergency patient whose hematocrit had fallen below 20 percent.

(Had fallen is active. Had isn't a form of to be. Besides, what did the falling?
Hematocrit, which appears before the verb.)

Know the Three Cures

Put a doer before the verb:

Not: The part must have been broken by the handlers.

But: The handlers must have broken the part.

Not: The requests must be approved. (By whom?)

But: The supervisor must approve the requests.

Not: Complete uniforms must be worn by all personnel.

But: All personnel must wear complete uniforms.

Or: Wear complete uniforms.

Drop part of the verb:

Not: The results are listed in the attachment.

But: The results are in the attachment.

Not: Then she was transferred to Maxwell AFB.

But: Then she transferred to Maxwell AFB.

Change the verb:

Not: Letter formats are shown in the correspondence manual.

But: Letter formats appear in the correspondence manual.

Not: The replacement has not been received yet.

But: The replacement has not arrived yet.

Write Passively only for Good Reason

Now and then, write passively if you have good reason to avoid saying who or what has done the verb's action. This situation may occur if the doer is unknown, unimportant, obvious, or better left unsaid:

Presidents are elected every four years. (doer obvious)

The part was shipped on I June. (doer unimportant, perhaps)

Christmas has been scheduled as a work day. (doer better left unsaid)

Now and then, you may want to write a passive sentence that names the doer. The situation may occur when you need a transition from one topic to another. The following sentence would shift a discussion from individual habit to group inertia:

Writing improvement is doubly difficult when individual habit is reinforced by group inertia.

Now and then, a passive sentence that names the doer is appropriate if the rest of the paragraph is about the receiver of the verb's action. The following sentence might work in a paragraph about a general.

Then the general was hit by a falling limb.

Finally, for variety or stateliness, you may want the slow procession of a passive sentence such as this one on a monument at the Air Force Academy:

Man's flight through life is sustained by the power of his knowledge.

When in doubt, write actively, even though the doer may seem obvious. You will write livelier sentences (not, livelier sentences will be written by you).

Practice on These Examples

The following paragraph comes from a letter that proposes to expand a Scheduled Airline Ticket Office (SATO). Find the passives and try to make them active. Then check yourself against the revision.

During that time period, a total of \$644,000 was expended in the issuance of government transportation requests (GTRs) for air travel. It is estimated by SATO that an additional \$10,000 per month would be generated through casual travel. A summary of the GTR revenue by month is provided in attachment 1.

Here is a sentence-by-sentence revision of the passive paragraph:

During that time period, a total of \$644,000 was expended in the issuance of government transportation requests (GTRs) for air travel.

We can cut 19 percent from the passive sentence above just by shortening during that time period to during that time and by omitting a total of. No writer has any excuse for not performing such simple subtraction. To avoid the passive was expended, we don't have to know who or what did the spending. The core idea is this: "During that time, government transportation requests (GTRs) for air travel totaled \$644,000." Now the verb carries more of the meaning, \$644,000 appears in a stronger place and the sentence is slimmer by 43 percent.

It is estimated by SATO that an additional \$10,000 per month would be generated through casual travel.

This sentence is easy to improve because does follow both passive verbs. "SATO estimates that casual travel would generate an additional \$10,000 per month." Though active now, the sentence still needs work. We can shorten generate to add, and additional to another, and per to a. For clarity, casual travel can become off-duty travel. These small improvements add up: "SATO estimates that off-duty travel would add \$10,000 a month."

A summary of the GTR revenue by month is provided in attachment 1.

Though the sentence would be shorter if we simply dropped provided, the weak is would remain. Better to reshape the sentence: "Attachment 1 provides a summary of the GTR revenue by month." But provides a summary is a smothered verb for summarizes. So the best improvement is this: "Attachment 1 summarizes the GTR revenue by month." Here is the passive original again, followed by the active version:

Passive: During that time period, a total of \$644,000 was expended in the issuance of government transportation requests (GTRs) for air travel. It is estimated by SATO that an additional \$10,000 per month would be generated through casual travel. A summary of the GTR revenue by month is provided in attachment 1. (50 words)

Active: During that time, government transportation requests (GTRs) for air travel totaled \$644,000. SATO estimates that off-duty travel would add \$10,000 a month. Attachment 1 summarizes the GTR revenue by month. (31 words)

The following letter, from an inspector general, suffers from epidemic passives and other problems. On a separate sheet of paper, rewrite the letter to make it organized, spoken, concise, and active.

Attachment 1 is forwarded for review and comment as to concurrence or non-concurrence with the recommendations of the subject to inspection. Only those recommendations requiring action are forwarded. Comments are requested by 7 June in order that approval and implementing can be taken. Recommendations will stand as written if concurrence is not provided by the above date.

Status reports or comments concerning actions completed or in progress are not to be submitted at this time. Guidance on status reporting will be provided at a later date. (85 words)

Here's our version (you may have come up with a better one).

Please concur or non-concur with the inspection recommendations in attachment 1. To consider changes to these recommendations, we must have your comments by 7 June.

Don't send status reports about actions completed or in progress. Guidance on these will reach you later. (40 words)

The second sentence of the original is unnecessary. Elsewhere in the original the writing is swollen: provided and submitted for sent, in order that for so, and at a later date for later. But the worst damage comes from the seven untouched-by-human-hands passives. They force readers to pause and figure out just who is supposed to do what. The revision avoids the passives by talking directly to a typical reader. Note the personal pronouns, contractions, and please.

Please, the first word of the active version, is a convention of modern writing (and speaking) that helps avoid many roundabout constructions. "Please send us two blivets" is far more efficient than "it is requested that two blivets be sent to this command." Real men and women do say "please."