

## 2020-Beth Schachter-Slack-posts-active verbs

### The Hunt for Active Verbs

Greetings G-RISE Fellows,

If you want your writing to be clear, crisp and compelling, use more active-verb sentences. To move from passive- to active-voice constructions on your current writing project, make a list of nouns you will use in the document. Include both nouns describing the science and those associated with the scientists. Then, pair each noun with a verb (or two or three). Keep that list handy, not to necessarily use while you write your sh\*\*ty first draft, but to try out when you move to the rewriting and editing phase of the project. Below is my list of noun-verb pairs. Feel free to post your own list on this site.

cells migrate  
organelles sequester  
vesicles expel  
pseudopodia engulf  
ligands clasp  
chromatin protrudes  
virus hijacks  
chromatids segregate  
carcinomas portend  
investigator engineered  
biomarkers highlight  
inconsistencies emerge  
data substantiate  
photomicrograph revealed  
perturbation outpaced  
revelation simplified  
competitors concur  
host upgraded

This blog post encourages scientists to write in the active voice most of the time. The author, evolutionary ecologist, Stephen Heard, gives four specific situations/conditions in which using the passive voice might be preferred. See if this resonates with you: <https://scientistseessquirrel.wordpress.com/2017/12/14/defenders-of-the-passive-voice/#toof2> (edited)



[Scientist Sees Squirrel | ScientistSeesSquirrel](#)  
[Defenders of the passive voice](#)

I mention in my book, *The Scientist's Guide to Writing*, that there are few better ways to get academics arguing than to bring up the topic of the passive voice. I'm reminded of this every time I get into a discussion of voice, either online or in person, in my department. As you'd expect for a topic provoking argument, there are strongly held opinions on both sides: that scientific writing should use the active voice, or that the passive voice should be used instead\*.

In general, I'm a passionate advocate for the active voice (although I acknowledge that a reasonable person can disagree). Either on Twitter or in real life, I'll often say something about avoiding the passive, and almost always somebody will come back with an objection. These objections take a number of forms, both among different objectors but also within a single objector's argument. Two things interest me about patterns in those objections.

First, a defender of the passive will often produce a shifting defence. As an example, the exchange might go like this:

– Me: "We should avoid the passive"

- Defender: “No, the passive is preferable because it’s more professional”
- “What makes it professional?”
- “It’s what readers expect from scientific writing”
- “Isn’t that circular?”
- “Maybe. But the passive is clearer”
- “Is there data to show that it’s clearer?”
- “I don’t know. But it puts the focus on the object, where it should be”
- “And why should it be there?”
- “Because it’s more professional”

And on it goes. Not always this set of arguments, or in this order, but in this kind of bobbing and weaving rhetorical dance, with the argument twisting but never quite being pinned down. When it happens, I wonder if this kind of rhetorical style betrays a very common human behaviour: the appeal to any and every argument to rationalize a conclusion that’s already been reached. (I know this is a very common human behaviour, because I catch myself doing it all the time.) Most of us were trained to write science in the passive voice, and most of us are accustomed to reading science in the passive voice. Humans are very good at defending the familiar, whether it deserves defending or not\*\* – and at making that defence look like a rational argument even when it isn’t. (To be clear: I’m not arguing that all defenders of the passive are doing this; but I suspect that some are, and I think pro-passive arguments merit careful scrutiny simply because they’re arguing for the familiar.) Second, a defender of the passive will often produce a narrowing defence. It will start with a blanket “We should use the passive”, and when challenged will soon morph to “we should use the passive because it’s better in situations X and Y”. And here’s the thing: many of these narrow arguments are, narrowly, correct. There really are situations in which the passive is an asset to our scientific writing. For example:

Breaking a series of active-voice sentences with a passive-voice one can help vary the rhythm of a passage, making writing less monotonous.

An occasional use of the passive can direct the reader’s attention to something by moving it into the more prominent position in the sentence, before the verb. (“Beetles were identified to species, but other taxa only to genus”).

The passive obscures the actor, and sometimes that’s right because we don’t know or care who the actor is. (“Non-parametric methods are preferred when data violate ANOVA assumptions” is arguably better than “Statisticians prefer non-parametric methods”, because for a broadly accepted consensus, identifying the actor doesn’t help the reader.)

The passive can help ease a reader into a sentence by avoiding a long, complicated subject. (“Buprestid and cerambycid beetles, woodwasps, and several other taxa that damage trees or vector pathogenic fungi attacked the wounded trees” is unwieldy and asks a reader to load into memory 16 words from “buprestid” to “fungi” before discovering the more familiar “trees” where the action takes place. “Our trees were attacked by buprestid and cerambycid beetles, woodwasps, and several other taxa that damage trees or vector pathogenic fungi” is much clearer.

This isn’t a comprehensive list of situations where a little passive helps – so I too am a defender of the passive. Some of the time.

So wait. If I agree with these (narrow) defences of the passive, why do I style myself “an advocate for the active voice”? It’s simple. Few scientific writers need encouragement to use more passive voice. Given how difficult it is for passive-trained writers to break the habit – and I speak from prolonged personal experience – nearly all of us need continued encouragement to use less. The survival of the passive voice will surely take care of itself; what we need to worry about, as writers, is promoting and protecting the use of the active.

I'll continue to proselytize, then, and no doubt continue to experience the pushback. If that pushback helps people think deliberately about why we write in the passive, and whether and when there's a case for doing it, that can only help our writing. I think that's a job worth doing.

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This post is based, in part, on material from *The Scientist's Guide to Writing*, my guidebook for scientific writers. You can learn more about it [here](#).

\*^See what I did there? English sentences can be written in two voices. In the active voice, we have actor-verbed-the-acted-upon: We felled ten trees. In the passive voice, we have (roughly) acted-upon-was-verbed-by-an-often-implicit-actor: Ten trees were felled (presumably by somebody). Any book on English composition will offer a more formal and more precise treatment of this, but the forms are familiar to all of us.

\*\*^Perhaps you'll think this older post is a fine example.