

Abusing the Passive Voice

The passive voice inverts the typical order of a sentence. In passive sentences, the “logical” subject receives the action instead of performing it. For example, in the sentence, “The building’s frontispiece was only recently restored by the architects, Charles Wilder and Wilson Hampton,” the two architects really are the “logical” subject. In this case, however, the architects have become the agent of action. The “grammatical” subject (frontispiece) determines the verb’s conjugation in the passive version of the idea, “frontispiece was” as opposed to “architects restored”. Sometimes in a passive sentence the true or “logical” subject disappears altogether. For example, “The two old cars are painted red”. In this case, “[by] the owner” has been left out. In either case, the active verb construction (subject-verb-object) has been altered. The original verb has been converted into a participle which is then tied to the linking verb “to be”. Meanwhile, the original object (frontispiece) becomes the new subject.

In effective writing, the passive voice purposely shifts attention from the subject to the object. For instance, a lot of people may have participated in the construction, remodeling, and later renovation of a building. In a descriptive paragraph about the building, the phases of the building’s construction become the focus of one’s attention; they are more interesting. So, in this case, the passive voice helps to play down the role of the individual people and highlight the stages of the building’s development. The reader doesn’t get lost in a series of actions performed by a list of different actors.

Unfortunately, many writers don’t pay close enough attention to the rhetorical situation. They employ the passive voice too often without purpose and end up overusing it. As a result, they create unclear, indirect, and wordy sentences. For this reason, it’s a good idea to rein in the use of the passive voice. Applying the Paramedic Method to one’s writing helps accomplish this.

Try rewriting the following sentences after applying the Paramedic Method:

1. *Wikihow* was founded in 2005 by Jack Herrick and is aimed at helping everyone in the world to learn how to do anything. The year it was started the website was visited by over 35.5 million unique visitors. Now it is surpassing that record.
2. Chickens stacked in crates and waiting to be slaughtered are being given food and water by animal activists. Health code violations have been used as justification for this action by the organizers of the protest.
3. If hostile powers were to appear to be able to match nuclear devices with delivery systems, then a preventive nuclear attack might in all honesty be considered by Israel. Undoubtedly diplomatic and security efforts must be increased in the United States to help avoid this.

4. Teenage pregnancy, also known as adolescent pregnancy, is frequently identified by young people themselves. It is seen as one of the critical issues that is affecting their community and it is recognized as a major impediment to the education, health, and well-being of their peers.
5. This past weekend comments by Sir Patrick Stewart and Billy Dee Williams were revealed about how they have been grappling with the public's misconception of space exploration. Reluctance to deal with current sociopolitical problems were specified by the two stars as the main reasons not to jump so far ahead in terms of investment into space exploration. According to the two actors, true progress will be made only after our nation's sociopolitical problems have been resolved.
6. According to a new study, the olfactory system is affected in two ways by sleep deprivation. Due to the loss of sleep, food odors are sharpened and the olfactory system's communication with other areas of the body that receive food signals is weakened. As a result, food selection and consumption are altered.
7. Due to human activity, the planet is warming and the harmful effects of this global warming are beginning to be felt in many areas. Severe droughts and floods are experienced with many significant consequences. Luckily, practical solutions, like reducing carbon emissions, can be found close at hand and passed on to create a healthier and safer world.
8. Computer addiction is often described by psychologists as the excessive or compulsive use of the computer. Tirelessness in its usage in the face of negative consequences in the areas of one's social, personal, or occupational life is indicated as the most significant sign of this addiction. Computer addiction is commonly diagnosed as a compulsive-impulsive disorder and is involved in excessive gaming, sexual preoccupations, and social texting.
9. The creation and expansion of farms, ranches, and urban areas are typically associated with deforestation. However, efforts to stop deforestation are now being derailed by new threats like forest fires in the Amazon and bulldozers that are plowing down cacti for Trump's border wall in the deserts of Arizona and New Mexico.
10. Michigan's Kirtland's warbler bird was taken off the endangered species list due to the help of the US wildlife management agencies, conservation groups, and even the lumber industry. This songbird is noted for its yellow underbelly and has now been sighted in at least 2000 nests. Indeed, a success story like this should be celebrated and shared with our families, friends, and community.