

Writing with Clarity

In our professional writing courses, we emphasize writing with clarity, efficiency, and effectiveness. This month, Professor Jane Douglas focuses on the first element that makes for optimal clarity. For the neurocognitive basis for these writing guidelines, read "[The New Science of Writing.](#)"

Clarity invites us to read—and keeps us happily reading. Clarity always distinguishes good writing from the jungly thickets of dead sentences that you couldn't recall five minutes after reading them, if someone held a Glock packing Black Rhinos to your head.

Try to visualize the concrete details in the following examples:

Example A: *The managers laid off the employees and closed the branch to save costs.*

Example B: *The branch was closed and the employees laid off as an attempt at cost savings.*

Clarity Principle #1: Prefer active to passive construction.

If you glance again at Example A, you'll notice that managers the action in the sentence in chronological order. First they laid off employees, then they closed the branch, resulting in cost savings.

But in Example B, the sentence distorts the order in which the actions occurred. The action flows back-asswards, so to speak, with the outcome of the managers' actions conveyed passively. In this version, even though the management must have initiated the main action in the sentence, in grammatical terms, they're strictly no-shows in the sentence.

In Example B, the verb is the ever-dynamic *was closed*. Note how the presence of forms of *to be* (*is, was, was being, was seen to be*) shoves the action into the wings. You're no longer witnessing an event unfolding. Instead, some unseen being is narrating the event *ex post facto*, hardly edge-of-the-seat stuff, let alone the things stories are made of. But, while passive verbs sap the vigor from sentences, they don't always signify a passive sentence or what's known as passive construction. Passive verbs are merely a symptom of a sentence that might be passively constructed. You can have a passive verb and an actively constructed sentence, but not an active verb and a passively constructed sentence.

Confused? Try this acid test. Answer the question *Who is doing the _____ here?* after inserting the main verb in the sentence or clause. If the answer to the question

isn't the grammatical subject of the sentence (see "First Aid Kit"), then the subject is passive.

Why Is Active Construction Such a Big Deal?

Our brains process active sentences more efficiently than passive sentences for four reasons. First, most psychologists agree that cause and effect—exemplified in the sequences of images that made babies' heart rates and blood pressure jump—are fundamental to human perception. In study after study, researchers have found that readers process sentences containing causal relationships more quickly than they do other kinds of sentences. Second, causal order involves active construction, which reproduces the chronological order of events. If I say *I lobbed the cookies at his head*, the sentence preserves the order of events in which I chucked a batch of Mrs. Fields' finest at my victim's head. But if I say *The cookies were lobbed at his head by me*—virtually the same sentence, different word order—the result of the tossing precedes *me*, the actor who actually tossed those lumps of dough. And this inverted order requires readers to understand the action by reassembling the pieces in order. Third, readers' brains take longer to process passive construction but tend to speed through active. And, finally, active construction builds on the default order of sentences in English—subject-verb-object.

In fact, in nearly every language in the world, subjects normally precede objects and nearly always come before verbs. As psychologist Steven Pinker notes in his popular book *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*, most languages have either a subject-verb-object order or a subject-object-verb order, both natural orders for depicting cause and effect. But English's subject-verb-object order may even be based on a sort of default for all languages. As linguist John McWhorter has noted, the world's newest languages, regardless of the languages they're descended from, tend to feature subject-verb-object order. In the 1970s, when linguists in South America discovered people in Guyana speaking a new, weird kind of Dutch, they discovered the speakers of the language, now known as Berbice Dutch, formed sentences with subject-verb-object order. Yet the languages Berbice Dutch evolved from—Dutch and an African language called Ijo—both place verbs at the ends of their sentences. In spite of its origins, Berbice Dutch evolved from two subject-object-verb languages into a subject-verb-object language order most likely because this order more closely replicates the way we perceive events in the world. First we encounter the actor, then the action, then the result. Just like life—at least most of the time.