

Writing Tool #2: Use Strong Verbs

Use verbs in their strongest form, the simple present or past. Strong verbs create action, save words, and reveal the players.

President John F. Kennedy testified that his favorite book was "From Russia With Love," the 1957 James Bond adventure by Ian Fleming. This choice revealed more about JFK than we knew at the time and created a cult of 007 that persists to this day.

The power in Fleming's prose flows from the use of active verbs. In sentence after sentence, page after page, England's favorite secret agent, or his beautiful companion, or his villainous adversary performs the action of the verb.

Bond *climbed* the few stairs and *unlocked* his door and *locked* and *bolted* it behind him. Moonlight *filtered* through the curtains. He *walked* across and *turned* on the pink-shaded lights on the dressing-table. He *stripped* off his clothes and *went* into the bathroom and *stood* for a few minutes under the shower. ... He *cleaned* his teeth and *gargled* with a sharp mouthwash to get rid of the taste of the day and *turned* off the bathroom light and *went* back into the bedroom.

Bond *drew* aside one curtain and *opened* wide the tall windows and *stood*, holding the curtains open and looking out across the great boomerang curve of water under the riding moon. The night breeze felt wonderfully cool on his naked body. He *looked* at his watch. It *said* two o'clock.

Bond *gave* a shuddering yawn. He *let* the curtains drop back into place. He *bent* to switch off the lights on the dressing-table. Suddenly he *stiffened* and his heart *missed* a beat.

There had been a nervous giggle from the shadows at the back of the room. A girl's voice *said*, "Poor Mister Bond. You must be tired. Come to bed."

In writing this passage, Fleming followed the advice of his countryman George Orwell, who wrote of verbs: "Never use the passive when you can use the active."

Never say never, Mr. Orwell, lest you turn one of the writer's most reliable tools into a rigid rule. But we honor you for describing the relationship between language abuse and political abuse, and for revealing how corrupt leaders use the passive voice to obscure unspeakable truths and shroud responsibility for their actions. They say: "It must be admitted after the report is reviewed that mistakes were made," rather than, "I read the report, and I admit I made a mistake."

News writers reach often for the simple active verb. Consider this *New York Times* lead by Carlotta Gall on the suicidal desperation of Afghan women: "Waiflike, draped in a pale blue veil, Madina, 20, *sits* on her hospital bed, bandages covering the terrible, raw burns on her

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neck and chest. Her hands *tremble*. She *picks* nervously at the soles of her feet and confesses that three months earlier she *set* herself on fire with kerosene."

While Fleming used the past tense to narrate his adventure, Gall prefers verbs in the present tense. This strategy immerses the reader in the immediacy of experience, as if we were sitting - right now -- beside the poor woman in her grief.

Both Fleming and Gall avoid the verb qualifiers that attach themselves to standard prose like barnacles to the hull of a ship:

- Sort of
- Tend to
- Kind of
- Must have
- Seemed to
- Could have
- Use to

Scrape away these crustaceans during revision, and the ship of your prose will glide toward meaning with efficient speed and grace.

Writing Tool #39: The Voice of Verbs

Choose active or passive verbs for their special effects.

Use active verbs -- but don't dismiss the passive.

The gold standard for writing advice is this: "Use active verbs." Those three words have been uttered in countless writing workshops with such conviction that they must be true. But are they?

Check out that last paragraph. In the first clause, I use a form of the verb 'to be,' in this case 'is.' In the next sentence I use the passive voice, 'have been uttered.' In the final sentence, I resort to 'are,' another form of 'to be.' My tricky point is that you can create acceptable prose, from time to time, without active verbs.

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I learned the distinction between the active and passive voice as early as fifth grade. I did not learn, until much later, why that distinction mattered. But let me first correct a popular misconception. The 'voice' of verbs (active or passive) has nothing to do with the 'tense' of verbs. Writers will sometimes ask: "Is it ever OK to write in the passive tense?" Tense defines action within time, when the verb happens. Voice defines the relationship between subject and verb, who does what.

- If the subject performs the action of the verb, we call the verb "active."
- If the subject receives the action of the verb, we call the verb "passive."
- A verb that is neither active nor passive is a linking verb, a form of the verb "to be."

All verbs fit into one of those three baskets.

Any of these verb forms can appear in any tense. So an active verb can indicate the past: "Thompson kicked the winning goal." Or the future: "I bet Thompson will kick the winning goal." Or any other tense. So please never confuse voice and tense again.

Why, then, does voice matter? It matters because of the different effects active, passive, and "to be" have on the reader or listener. One of my favorite writers, John Steinbeck, describes this encounter in North Dakota:

Presently I saw a man leaning on a two-strand barbed-wire fence, the wires fixed not to posts but to crooked tree limbs stuck in the ground. The man wore a dark hat, and jeans and long jacket washed palest blue with lighter places at knees and elbows. His pale eyes [were frosted] with sun glare and his lips scaly as snakeskin. A .22 rifle leaned against the fence beside him, and on the ground lay a little heap of fur and feathers -- rabbits and small birds. I pulled up to speak to him, saw his eyes wash over Rocinante, sweep up the details, and then retire into their sockets. And I found I had nothing to say to him ... so we simply brooded at each other.

I count 13 verbs in that passage, 12 active, and one passive, a ratio Strunk & White would admire. The litany of active verbs heats up the scene, even though not much is happening. The active verbs reveal who is doing what. The author sees the man. The man wears a hat.

The author pulls up to talk with him. They brood at each other. Even inanimate objects perform action. The rifle leans against the fence. Dead animals lie on the ground.

Embedded in all that verbal activity is one splendid passive verb. "His pale eyes were frosted with sun glare." Form follows function. The eyes, in real life, received the action of the sun, so the subject receives the action of the verb.

That's a writing tool: Use passive verbs to call attention to the receiver of the action. Remember, from a previous tool, [Jeff Elder's short piece on the extinction of the passenger pigeon](#)? He used passive verbs to paint the birds as victims: "Enormous roosts were gassed from trees ... They were shipped to market in rail car after rail car ... In one human generation, America's most populous native bird was wiped out."

The best writers make the craftiest choices between active and passive. A few paragraphs from the one cited above, Steinbeck wrote: "The night was loaded with omens." Steinbeck could have written "Omens loaded the night," but the active voice would have cheated both the night and the omens, the meaning and the music of the sentence.

We would expect strong active verbs in a news story about tsunami relief efforts:

Rescue planes from throughout the world delivered supplies for millions of survivors around South Asia on Wednesday, but disorganization blocked the lifesaving food, water, and medicine from reaching many of those stricken and in need.

But the same *Washington Post* writer uses the passive when the focus turns to the receivers of action:

Cartons of food and water were stacked in an airplane hangar in the devastated Aceh region of northern Indonesia after military transports delivered tons of supplies to the provincial capital of Banda Aceh, which was mostly destroyed in the Sunday earthquake and tsunami that hit minutes later.

[Paulo Freire](#), a Brazilian educator, uses the distinction between active and passive verbs to challenge an educational system that places the power of teachers over the needs of students. An oppressive educational system, he argues, is one in which:

- the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
- the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined.

In other words, an oppressive system is one in which the teacher is active and the students are passive.

George Orwell argues that the passive voice can be a tool for political abuse. Rather than say, "The mayor studied this problem and accepts full responsibility for the mistakes he made," we get, "This has been looked into and it must be admitted that mistakes were made." The passive allows the speaker or writer to hide the agent.

A strong active verb can add dimension to the cloudiness created by some uses of the verb 'to be.' Strunk & White provides a nifty example. "There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground" becomes "Dead leaves covered the ground." A five-word sentence outworks one with 12 words.

In graduate school, Don Fry helped me see how my prose wilted under the weight of passive and 'to be' verbs. Sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph began "It is interesting to note that..." or "There are those occasions when..." the kind of pompous indirection bred by the quest for an advanced degree.

But there are sweet uses of "to be," as Diane Ackerman demonstrates in this passage about one difference between men and women:

The purpose of ritual for men is to learn the rules of power and competition ... The purpose of ritual for women is to learn how to make human connections. They are often more intimate and vulnerable with one another than they are with their men, and taking care of other women teaches them to take care of themselves. In these formal ways, men and women domesticate their emotional lives. But their strategies are different, their biological itineraries are different. His sperm needs to travel, her egg needs to settle down. It's astonishing that they survive happily at all.

'Domesticate' is a strong active verb. So is 'needs' in the sentence about sperm and egg. But, mostly, the author uses the verb 'to be,' what we once called -- promiscuously -- the 'copulative' verb, to forge some daring intellectual connections.

So here's your "tool" of thumb:

- Active verbs move the action and reveal the actors.
- Passive verbs emphasize the receiver, the victim.
- The verb 'to be' links word and ideas.