

Exercise 4.2

In the following, change all active verbs into passives, and all passives into actives. Which sentences improve? Which do not? (In the first two, active verbs that could be passive are italicized; verbs already passive are boldfaced.)

1. Independence is **gained** by those on welfare when skills are **learned** that the marketplace *values*.
2. Different planes of the painting are **noticed**, because their colors are *set* against a background of shades of gray that are **laid** on in layers that cannot be *seen* unless the surface is **examined** closely.
3. In this article, it is argued that the Vietnam War was fought to extend influence in Southeast Asia and was not ended until it was made clear that the United States could not defeat North Vietnam unless atomic weapons were used.
4. Science education will not be improved in this nation to a level sufficient to ensure that American industry will be supplied with skilled workers and researchers until more money is provided to primary and secondary schools.
5. The first part of Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" is presented in a dispassionate way. In the first paragraph, two sentinels are described in detail, but the line, "It did not appear to be the duty of these two men to know what was occurring at the center of the bridge" takes emotion away from them. In paragraph 2, a description is given of the surroundings and spectators, but no feeling is betrayed because the language used is neutral and unemotional. This entire section is presented as devoid of emotion even though it is filled with details.

The "Objective" Passive vs. *I/We*

Some scholarly writers claim that they should not use a first-person subject, because they need to create an objective point of view, something like this:

Based on the writers' verbal intelligence, prior knowledge, and essay scores, their essays **were analyzed** for structure and evaluated for richness of concepts. The subjects **were** then **divided** into a high- or low-ability group. Half of each group **was** randomly **assigned** to a treatment group or to a placebo group.

Contrary to that claim, academic and scientific writers use the active voice and the first-person *I* and *we* regularly. These next passages come from articles in respected journals:

- ✓ This paper is concerned with two problems. How can **we** best handle in a transformational grammar certain restrictions that . . . , To illustrate, **we** may cite . . . , **we** shall show . . .
- ✓ Since the pituitary-adrenal axis is activated during the acute phase response, **we** have investigated the potential role . . . Specifically, **we** have studied the effects of interleukin-1 . . .

Here are the first few words from several consecutive sentences from *Science*, a journal of great prestige:

- ✓ **We** examine . . . , **We** compare . . . , **We** have used . . . , Each has been weighted . . . , **We** merely take . . . , They are subject . . . , **We** use . . . , Efron and Morris describe . . . , **We** observed . . . , **We** might find . . .

—John P. Gilbert, Bucknam McPeck, and Frederick Mosteller,
"Statistics and Ethics in Surgery and Anesthesia," *Science*

It is not true that academic writers always avoid the first person *I* or *we*.

Passives, Characters, and Metadiscourse

When academic writers do use the first person, however, they use it in certain ways. Look at the verbs in the passages above. There are two kinds:

- One kind refers to research activities: *study, investigate, examine, observe, use*. Those verbs are usually in the passive voice: *The subjects were observed . . .*
- The other kind of verb refers not to the subject matter or the research, but to the writer's own writing and thinking: *cite, show, inquire*. These verbs are often active and in the first person: *We will show . . .* They are examples of what is called METADISCOURSE. Metadiscourse is the language you use when you refer not to the substance of your ideas, but to yourself, your reader, or your writing:
 - your thinking and act of writing: *We/I will explain, show, argue, claim, deny, suggest, contrast, add, expand, summarize . . .*
 - your readers' actions: *consider now, as you recall, look at the next example . . .*
 - the logic and form of what you have written: *first, second; to begin; therefore, however, consequently . . .*

Metadiscourse appears most often in introductions, where writers announce their intentions: *I claim that . . . , I will show . . . , We begin by . . . ,* and again at the end, when they summarize: *I have argued . . . , I have shown . . .*

On the other hand, scholarly writers use the first person less often to describe specific actions they performed as *part* of their research. We rarely find passages like this:

To determine if monokines elicited an adrenal steroidogenic response, **I ADDED** preparations of . . .

The writer of the original sentence used a passive verb, *were added*, to name an action that anyone can perform, not just the writer:

To determine if monokines elicited a response, **preparations . . . WERE ADDED.**

A passive sentence like that, however, can create a problem: its writer dangled a modifier. You dangle a modifier when an introductory phrase has an *implied* subject that differs from the *explicit* subject in the following or preceding CLAUSE. In that example, the implied subject of the INFINITIVE VERB *determine* is *I* or *we*: *I determine* or *we determine*.

[So that **I** could] determine if monokines elicited a response, preparations **WERE ADDED.**

But that implied subject, *I*, differs from the *explicit* subject of the clause it introduces—*preparations were added*. When the two differ, the modifier dangles. Writers of scientific prose use this pattern so often, though, that it has become standard usage in their community.

We might note that this impersonal “scientific” style is a modern development. In his “New Theory of Light and Colors” (1672), Sir Isaac Newton wrote this charming first-person account of an experiment:

I procured a triangular glass prism, to try therewith the celebrated phenomena of colors. And for that purpose, having darkened my laboratory, and made a small hole in my window shade, to let in a convenient quantity of the sun’s light, I placed my prism at the entrance, that the light might be thereby refracted to the opposite wall. It was at first a very pleasing diversion to view the vivid and intense colors produced thereby.

QUICK TIP: Some teachers prohibit the use of *I* everywhere in the writing of their students not because it is wrong, but because inexperienced writers begin too many sentences with *I think . . .*, *I believe . . .*, and so on. Others forbid *I* because they want to discourage students from writing a narrative account of their thinking: *First I read . . .*, *Then I considered . . .* On those two occasions, follow their advice.

Here's the point: Some writers and editors avoid the first person by using the passive everywhere, but deleting an *I* or *we* doesn't make a researcher's thinking more objective. We know that behind those impersonal sentences are still flesh-and-blood people doing, thinking, and writing. In fact, the first-person *I* and *we* are common in scholarly prose when used with verbs that name actions unique to the writer.

Exercise 4.3

The verbs in 1 through 4 below are passive, but two could be active because they are metadiscourse verbs that would take first-person subjects. Revise the passive verbs that should be changed into active verbs. Then go through each sentence again and revise nominalizations into verbs where appropriate.

1. It is believed that a lack of understanding about the risks of alcohol is a cause of student bingeing.
2. The model has been subjected to extensive statistical analysis.
3. Success in exporting more crude oil for hard currency is suggested here as the cause of the improvement of the Russian economy.
4. The creation of a database is being considered, but no estimate has been made in regard to the potential of its usefulness.

The verbs in 5 through 8 are active, but some of them should be passive because they are not metadiscourse verbs. Revise in other ways that seem appropriate.

5. In Section IV, I argue that the indigenous peoples engaged in overcultivation of the land leading to its exhaustion as a food-producing area.

6. Our intention in this book is to help readers achieve an understanding not only of the differences in grammar between Arabic and English but also the differences in worldview as reflected by Arabic vocabulary.
7. To make an evaluation of changes in the flow rate, I made a comparison of the current rate with the original rate on the basis of figures I had compiled with figures that Jordan had collected.
8. We performed the tissue rejection study on the basis of methods developed with our discovery of increases in dermal sloughing as a result of cellular regeneration.

Exercise 4.4

In these sentences, change passive verbs into actives only where you think it will improve the sentence. If necessary, invent a rhetorical situation to account for your choice of active or passive. (Different answers are correct for this one.)

1. Your figures were analyzed to determine their accuracy. Results will be announced when it is thought appropriate.
2. Home mortgage loans now are made for thirty years. With the price of housing at inflated levels, those loans cannot be paid off in a shorter time.
3. The author's impassioned narrative style is abandoned and a cautious treatment of theories of conspiracy is presented. But when the narrative line is picked up again, he invests his prose with the same vigor and force.
4. Many arguments were advanced against Darwinian evolution in the nineteenth century because basic assumptions about our place in the world were challenged by it. No longer were humans defined as privileged creatures but rather as a product of natural forces.
5. For many years, federal regulations concerning wiretapping have been enforced. Only recently have looser restrictions been imposed on the circumstances that warrant it.

In these sentences, change passives to actives where appropriate and change nominalizations into verbs. Invent characters where necessary.

6. It is my belief that the social significance of smoking receives its clearest explication through an analysis of peer interaction among adolescents. In particular, studies should be made of the manner in which interactive behavior is conditioned by social class.

7. These directives are written in a style of maximum simplicity as a result of an attempt at more effective communication with employees with limited reading skills.
8. The ability of the human brain to arrive at solutions to human problems has been undervalued because studies have not been done that would be considered to have scientific reliability.

Exercise 4.5

The excerpt below is from an actual letter from the chancellor of a state university to parents of students. Except for the second word, *you*, why is the first part so impersonal? Why is the last part more personal? Change the first part so that you name in subjects who ever performs an action. Then change the second part to eliminate all characters. How do the two parts now differ? Have you improved the letter? This exercise raises the question of deliberate misdirection, an issue we'll cover in Lesson 12.

As you probably have heard, the U of X campus has been the scene of a number of incidents of racial and sexual harassment over the last several weeks. The fact that similar incidents have occurred on campuses around the country does not make them any less offensive when they take place here. Of the ten to twelve incidents that have been reported since early October, most have involved graffiti or spoken insults. In only two cases was any physical contact made, and in neither case was anyone injured.

U of X is committed to providing its students with an environment where they can live, work, and study without fear of being taunted or harassed because of their race, gender, religion, or ethnicity. I have made it clear that bigotry and intolerance will not be permitted and that U of X's commitment to diversity is unequivocal. We are also taking steps to improve security in campus housing. We at U of X are proud of this university's tradition of diversity . . .

NOUN + NOUN + NOUN

One more stylistic choice does not directly involve characters and actions, but we discuss it here because it can distort the match