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Actively Passive: Understanding Voice in Academic Writing

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"Patient observed to be resting. No apparent signs of distress. Passive range of motion exercises performed."

The traditional nursing note provides an interesting heuristic for understanding voice in writing. Those of us who have been nursing for two decades or more will remember the "old days" when we received strict instructions that "the nurse should not be present in her observations." This meant that if someone looked at our notes, they would see a kind of verbal picture of the patient: an unambiguous snapshot with clear detail and no superfluity. What we recorded at the bedside did not reflect a (our) point of view. Nurses were objective, neutral observers, and their words, like their views, would align with the words and view of any other anonymous nurse who might have been the observer had it been a different shift, or a different ward. To do this, we needed to step out of the prose, and leave a record of observations and of actions that did not identify us until we signed our names with a flourish at the end of the page, or scribbled our initials in the margins. Revealing our identity was a legal responsibility, but hiding it in our notes was a duty.

To conceal ourselves in this way was to enhance observation; it reduced the distraction of the almost-incident nurse. It is not that we did not observe our patients or help with exercises – it is just that any one of a number of nurses might have undertaken this observation and provided this help. It did not matter which one. So we retired into the obscurity of the passive voice.

The passive voice is a way of writing which omits any mention of the agent, or the person doing an action. Instead, it uses an auxiliary (generally the verb be); the subject of the sentence is not actually the agent of the action, rather its recipient. So, for example, when "the patient was observed to be sleeping", the patient may very well be the subject, but a passive subject being acted upon by a non-identified observer. The action is "observing." In an active voice, the subject and the agent are the same, and we would read, "The nurse observed the patient sleeping", or better still "I observed the patient sleeping." The reader knows exactly who did what.

Why do we use the passive voice?

The tenets of science and objectivity promote passive writing style. As the editorial guidelines about good writing in Nature Immunology explain, the passive voice "emphasizes the important 'actor' of the manuscript, namely, biology" ("Good Data," 2000). This is a belief with which many writers and philosophers would disagree. It is what Donna Haraway (1988) refers to as a "disembodied scientific objectivity" (p582) – a way of writing that infers, but in no way ensures, the neutral positioning of the observer. She reminds us that all knowledge is positioned and cannot be "known" from outside

of a subject position.

However, this distancing of the knowing subject from its object of study through the use of the passive voice pervades formal writing. It is the language of medicalese and bureaucratese. For example, we can read that an organization is keen to "be able to be seen as expert and authoritative." Few balk at words like "to be able to be seen", as awkward as they may be. This language sounds like a preamble to a policy paper, and its voice confirms the authority of the writer, even though it is a very complicated way of stating that the organization wants "the community to see it as expert and authoritative". Our proposed alternative is far clearer – it points out whose perception matters, that of the community. "To be able to be seen" also features in the similarly convoluted language of health care: "We want pediatricians to be able to be seen without going through a gatekeeper" argued a US Senator in her Floor Speech (Hutchinson, 2001). "Who's going through the gatekeeper?" one might wonder, musing over her words. Ah! She wants parents to be able to consult pediatricians without a referral. Her meaning becomes clear when we transform the sentence by using the active voice.

Because of conventions and history, it would seem we cannot help but link the passive voice with formality, authority and science. But this is a mistake. As the American Psychology Association publication manual makes clear, "Verbs are vigorous, direct communicators. Use the active rather than the passive voice, and select tense or mood carefully. **Prefer the active voice** [bold in original]." (Publication Manual, 2001, p41) And advice to authors from the British Medical Journal concurs. Guiding prospective authors about their house style, they state that to "write in a clear, direct, and active style" is "essential" ('BMJ house style,' 2006).

Yet, it takes some work to recover one's active voice. As Joseph Williams points out, "The style of each generation insinuates itself into the writing of the next" (Williams, 1994, p.7), and the traditional passive voice in scientific writing has a firm grip on us. How else can we possibly describe sample selection, statistical analysis, or patient behaviour? We offer some thoughts on the matter below, and three steps for assessing the use of the passive voice.

1) Identify occurrences of the passive voice

How can you tell if you have used the passive voice? To write in the passive voice, you must insert an additional auxiliary (generally, a form of the verb to be), and make the main verb into a passive participle (or an -ed participle). The active object may become the passive subject, or may be absent.

Examples:

-The data were_{auxiliary} coded_{past participle} by the research assistant_{passive subject}.

-The solution was_{auxiliary} applied_{past participle} twice daily (absent subject)

-It will be_{auxiliary} shown_{past participle} that narrative pedagogy is _{auxiliary} perceived to be a positive contribution to nursing education (absent subject)

Check your draft and see if and where you have instinctively placed the passive voice.

2) Determine the identity of the actor and whether or not its identification adds to your argument and/or improves your sentence.

Once you have identified a passive sentence, decide whether it should stay that way. In the first two examples above, our hypothetical author has decided to reveal that it was a research assistant who recorded the data, but not to indicate who applied the solution. Methodologically, and stylistically, this may make sense. For the first sentence, the author has identified who is doing data entry, information which the readers require. They want to know how analysis took place, and will probably require additional information about the data coders, insisting, for example, on statistics concerning inter-rater reliability. However, the writer has chosen the passive voice to highlight the “data” rather than the “research assistant.” The author had a choice to write:

The data were coded by the research assistant, or

The research assistant coded the data.

Either choice is acceptable to us. This may be a stylistic choice which assists flow; seeing the full manuscript would enlighten us. On the other hand, for the second example it may (or may not) be important to indicate who applies the solution. As this is a hypothetical study, we cannot judge this here, but a simple task, such as this one or such as “capillary blood samples were obtained”, need not necessarily be *auxiliary* linked *past participle* to the person performing the task. The author had the choice to write:

The solution was applied twice daily, **or**

The patient applied the solution twice daily.

We find the passive voice to be acceptable here.

However, in the final example, we struggle to find any possible justification for the use of the passive voice. Here, this elaborate and wordy sentence uses the passive voice in a way that lacks elegance, obfuscates meaning, and leaves the reader struggling to understand:

It will be shown that narrative pedagogy is perceived to be a positive contribution to nursing education.

How can this sentence work if we do not know who is showing us about narrative pedagogy, and whose perceptions we are considering?

We propose instead:

We will show that many nursing students find narrative pedagogy makes an important contribution to their education.

Our transformation makes the use of the first person. Many writers are uncomfortable about using the first person in either singular or plural form. Our introductory paragraphs help to explain why. The observer is not supposed to be present (who supposes this? We have used the passive voice here intentionally, as I am not sure who believes this. We are tempted to use emphatic quotation marks here: the observer isn't 'supposed' to be present – imagine hands in the air making little hook gestures, and rolling of the eyes.). In this sentence, however, as the first person fades into oblivion, the reader drifts into lethargy. It is too hard to read, too difficult to decipher. To remedy the confusion, there must be an active subject. Writers still too cautious to speak directly of themselves may use “the study” as an out: “This study will show . . .” allows the author to hide, if hide they must.

3) Be actively passive!

It would be sad to restrict our use of the English language to a set of rules and prescriptions which excludes past participles, and indeed we have used the passive voice liberally in this short article.

The passive voice has an important role in the construction of graceful and elegant prose. Katheryn Riley has pointed out that the passive voice also has a rhetorical role in scientific writing: present for exposition (methodology and results), absent for argumentation (introduction, discussion) (Riley, 1991).

To write well, one must be precise, judicious and creative. All of these factors require the author to think carefully and make decisions. The making of the decision is an action, one which cannot take place in the absence of researcher thought and subjectivity. We encourage nurse authors to think carefully about every sentence they write, and make active decisions about tense, person, style, and voice. Choosing the active or the passive voice is an important decision for an effective manuscript.

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