

# On Active and Passive Writing

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Active writing minces no words. It calls attention directly to responsible agents, stating clearly what they do and how they affect their surroundings. Passive writing wastes words. It diverts attention from responsible agents, focusing only on the effects of “external forces” on objects and people.

The distinction between the two types of writing goes much deeper than the use of active and passive verbal forms. Consider a model: there is an agent A and a target T; a “line of action” emanates from A and ends at T. The active voice emphasizes the initiation of action along the line from A to T. The passive voice emphasizes the receipt of action along that line.

But large variations in the degree of passivity are possible. At one extreme is the “near passive,” which is obtained from the active by converting verbs to passive forms. At the other extreme is the “remote passive,” which focuses on the target as the center of the universe, hides all agents, and obscures responsibility with long noun-strings. In between is the “middle passive,” which transfers responsibility from the agent to surrounding objects but does not completely hide the agent.

The degree of passivity may be related to the author’s feeling of control or influence over things around him. The active author has a good deal of confidence in his ability to influence events and people; he radiates his confidence like the sun. The closed passive author may see himself as a victim at the center of a black hole; he attracts every kind of unsolicited debris from unseen sources.

The following paragraphs tell the same story with four degrees of activity.

## Active

Frank Arthur, the president of Arthur Associates, was hostile and angry last Friday. After work he purposely drank too much. On the way home, he drove his car into a tree. The police forcibly removed his body and called his wife. His family scheduled his funeral Sunday. The stockholders, believing Frank committed suicide, lost confidence and drove down the price of Arthur Associates Stock.

## **Near Passive**

Frank Arthur, the president of Arthur Associates, was overwhelmed last Friday by hostility and anger. After work, too much was purposely drunk by him. On the way home, his car was driven by him into a tree. His body was removed forcibly by the police and his wife called. A funeral was scheduled for him by his family Sunday. Because Frank was believed by the stockholders to have committed suicide, the price of Arthur Associates stock was driven down.

## **Middle Passive**

Last Friday, hostility and anger invaded the President of Arthur Associates. After work, too much liquor forced its way down his gullet. On the way home, the car impacted itself into a tree. The body let itself be extracted by police force and notification went to his wife. The funeral became scheduled for Sunday by the family. Because the belief of suicide inculcated the stockholders, the price of Arthur Associates stock decided to drop.

## **Remote Passive**

With the advent of the last work week day, hostility and anger feelings overwhelmed the Arthur Associates president. The use of excessive liquor consumption upon completion of his job work time occurred. An arboreal upgrowth on the employer-to-domicile vehicular infrastructure pathway was impacted by his personal transport vehicle. A corpus delecti was having automotive extraction performed on it by police activated force. The spouse was having the bad news concepts meted out during a relevant telephone dialog. The funeral was being attended the following week beginning day. It was believed suicide has been committed and the Arthur Associates stock resource received a plummeting price blow.