Sentence Focus, Cohesion, and the Active and Passive Voices

Composition instructors should teach sentence focus or choice of subjects to promote cohesion and coherence and help determine active or passive voice.

by William S. Robinson

Introduction

Virtually every composition textbook issues warnings to students about not using the passive voice. In rare instances, a book will suggest that there are legitimate uses of the passive, but seldom indicates what those uses are.

It is hard to understand how the passive fell into ill repute since it is a legitimate and useful part of the language. If many of our textbooks are anything to go by, we English teachers do have an unfortunate habit of giving advice about writing that has no basis in reality, but in the case of the passive, that habit has spread far beyond the classroom. Joseph M. Williams has shown that George Orwell, in his famous essay "Politics and the English Language," "in the very act of criticizing the passive, not only casts his proscription against it in the passive, but almost all the sentences around it as well." And he notes, "I am bemused by the apparent fact that three generations of teachers have used this essay without there arising among us a general wry amusement that Orwell violated his own rules in the act of stating them" (158). That's the trouble with made-up rules—it's hard not to break them.

The Uses of the Passive

It is not hard, however, to spell out what the uses of the passive are. They are three:

1. We use the passive to focus on, to make the subject of the sentence, the word that would be the direct object if the sentence were written in the active voice.

   Stephen Crane wrote *The Red Badge of Courage.* (active voice: focuses on the author) *The Red Badge of Courage* was written by Stephen Crane. (passive voice: focuses on the novel)

2. We use the passive when the agent of an action is, in the context, "universal."

   The passive is usually employed in three circumstances. (by whom? by anyone)

3. We use the passive when the agent of an action is unknown or unimportant or when trying to express it would involve one in pointless complications.

   His trial was held on Monday and he was convicted. (Nothing would, in most cases, be gained by trying to put this sentence into the active with the concomitant need to find agents for the two verbs.)

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The Passive Voice and Topic-Comment Theory

But trying to teach these three as criteria for using the passive would be impractical since no one is going to hold them in mind while composing. Karen Scriven has taken a more productive approach by invoking the "given-new" and "topic-comment" theories of text coherence. She wrote, "Passive sentences have [. . .] [a] vital stylistic justification. Readers expect the information in the subject position to be the topic or theme of the discourse. Without the passive, the writer may have trouble meeting this reader expectation" (92). She didn't, however, suggest teaching strategies for dealing with this situation.

For those new to such matters as topic-comment ordering within sentences, good discussions can be found in William Vande Kopple, George Dillon (ch. 5), and Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartik (ch. 18).

In its simplest manifestations, topic-comment theory says that the head of a sentence(s), usually the noun phrase (NP) but sometimes an introductory modifier such as a prepositional phrase, is its topic and the rest of the sentence, the verb phrase (VP or predicate) is comment on that topic (S = NP+VP). While some theorists have argued that the NP usually presents "given" information—that is, information already in our possession—and the VP "new" information, it is not hard to find instances in which such is not the case. Dillon's view of the function of the NP seems to me more convincing. "We may think of the Topic," he writes, "as the standpoint that defines the background and the foreground—not the target of attention, but where attention is directed from. We can then think of the linguistic devices for marking and shifting the Topic as devices that orient the reader and thereby direct his attention." The Topic is "where we stand as we look toward the rest of the sentence" (105). For example, in the sentence "Dillon's view of the function of the NP seems to me more convincing," our attention is directed from the phrase *Dillon's view* to the phrase *seems to me more convincing.* Most commonly the word within the NP that specifies the topic is the subject, although as I mentioned above, it may be a word in an introductory clause or phrase or it may be a modifier of the subject.

This can be seen most easily in a passage in which the author is writing about a single topic and so tends to keep the NPs consistently focused on it. Here is an example from Barbara Tuchman's great book, *A Distant Mirror*. She is talking about the medieval castle:

> One governing concept shaped a castle: not residence, but defense. As fortress, it was an emblem of medieval life as dominating as the cross. In the *Romance of the Rose*, that vast compendium of everything but romance, the castle enclosing the Rose is the central structure [. . .]. In real life, all its arrangements testified to the fact of violence, the expectation of attack [. . .]. The castle's predecessor, the Roman villa, had been unfortified [. . .]. (5)

Here we can see the role of both subjects and introductory phrases in controlling the focus of the paragraph. The subjects are *concept*, with *castle* as direct object, *it*, *the castle*, *its arrangments*, and *the castle's predecessor*. The introductory phrases *as fortress*, *in the* "*Romance of the Rose*," and *in real life* also play an important part as guides to our reading of the paragraph. On the very next page, writing about the French province of Coucy, or Picardy, Tuchman uses as subjects *Coucy*, *Picardy*, *its rivers*, *its fertile soil*, *clearing*, *Picardy*, and *its temper*.

Notice that in the passage about the castle, Tuchman uses what could be seen as a passive voice in her last sentence. She could just as easily have written, "The Romans, however, did not fortify their villas," so why didn't she? The answer lies in the terms "cohesion" and "coherence."

Cohesion and Coherence

Stephen P. Witte and Lester Faigley in "Coherence, Cohesion, and Writing Quality" follow numerous other linguists in defining cohesion as explicit mechanisms in a text that tie its sentences together. "Coherence conditions, on the other hand, allow a text to be understood in a real-world setting" (199). If Tuchman had started her sentence with "The Romans," she would have, at least momentarily, thrown us off by causing us to wonder how the Romans suddenly got into a discussion of the medieval castle. This cohesion problem—nowhere in the preceding sentences have the Romans been mentioned—would have produced a coherence problem—where did they come from? But when she begins with "the castle's predecessor," we are, through an instance of lexical cohesion, comfortable with the new subject being introduced and understand immediately what its purpose is. A passive-voice verb seems a small price to pay.

Experiments with simple texts have shown that scrambling the order of topics from sentence to sentence (producing disorganized texts) or moving topic material into the VP or predicate and comment material into the NP (producing poorly focused texts) significantly degrades the ability of readers to remember the content of texts (see Dillon, ch. 5; and Vande Kopple "Functional"). Perhaps the most interesting thing about these discussions of text coherence and cohesion among linguists is that the words "active" and "passive" never come up. Why not?

The reason is that, from the point of view of both coherence and cohesion, writers must make their most important decisions before they get to the verb, when they decide what to put in the topic portion of the sentence, which is where the subject is, and, by implication, what they will reserve for the comment part, which is where the verb is. And the nature of the topic, and even more importantly, the nature of the grammatical subject will usually determine whether the verb is active or passive or neither. To illustrate this, here is a short text in which you will find three passives:

> In the 1920s and 30s some European military theorists believed that future wars would be won by air power alone. They argued that bombing would destroy cities and drive people mad, and they convinced most airmen of their thesis. In 1941, Germany put this theory into practice when it tried to subdue England from the air, and later in the war, England and the United States tried to do the same to Germany. The air attacks were made by brave and selfless crews, but they were never as effective as had been predicted.

In the first sentence, it seemed to me important to begin with a topic that framed the entire subsequent discussion—"In the 1920s and 30s, some European military theorists." And with "theorists" as subject, an active-voice verb was most likely to follow, since people tend to perform actions. In the noun clause, however, my second framing concept, "future wars," produced a passive. Had I chosen to make "air power" the topic, an active-voice verb would have resulted. The same situation comes up in the last sentence of the passage, where the voice of the verb is determined by whether one uses "air attacks" or "crews" as sub-

ject (and this situation arises yet again in the *where* clause in this sentence). And finally, the passive in the reduced clause at the end of the passage is also determined by the subject; here it is a function of my unwillingness to repeat the word "theorists" in this spot because, by this point, my focus has shifted from what theorists had once believed to be the results of actual attacks. Had I wanted to mention theorists again, an active verb would have resulted. There is no compelling argument for changing any of these passives to actives.

Teaching Sentence Focus

Since every native speaker of English commands the ability to produce either active or passive voice as required, the only reason for teaching the grammar of these voices would seem to be to enable writers to make a conscious choice about which to use. But here we encounter three objections. As the example of Orwell shows, even highly skilled, very experienced writers do not self-monitor for use of the active and passive. How much less likely is it, then, that inexperienced writers would be able to do so even if they knew how? Second, neither voice carries with it any special value anyway, so why would one want to worry about which of them one was using? And finally, the voice we use in a given clause is in any case primarily determined by another factor that does carry with it a value, the value of text cohesion and coherence and, thus, readability. Accordingly, if we teach sentence focus—the desirability of keeping the topic in the subject position in so far as possible—we will accomplish the end of teaching the appropriate uses of active and passive.

Studies of speech and writing have shown that academic writing differs from dyadic speech in, among other ways, employing nominalizations and abstract subjects in preference to personal and concrete ones, and it is probably inevitable, given the nature of academic work, that this should be so. But this feature results in an increased incidence of passives, for, as Donald C. Freeman has written, "Abstractions have far fewer, if any, opportunities to be agents [while] human beings are the best agents of all" (170).

Inexperienced young writers trying to enter the academic discourse community are thus likely to begin imitating what they see as its characteristics. Mimicking the writing they are exposed to, they will naturally seize upon its most obvious features, one of which is the preference for abstract over concrete or personal sentence subjects. Students in this transitional phrase can readily be taught to follow three easy principles that will help their prose in numerous ways:

- Make what you are talking about the subject of your sentence and don't worry about repeating it in subsequent sentences. Varying one's subjects when logic and cohesion call for them to be the same is a very bad idea. If a passage becomes monotonous because of strings of identical subjects, the problem is that the sentences are too short and some need to be joined.
- When possible, prefer a personal subject to an abstract one; for instance, words such as "one" or "the reader" will often serve well when an abstraction is being discussed. In the passage I quoted from Dillon earlier, he used the subject *we* three times when writing about very abstract material.

- Try to remember that actions are performed by humans; think what actions are involved in what you are writing about and try to use as your sentence subjects words referring to the humans performing those actions.

Exercises in employing such principles in revision passages are generally effective in showing students how to avoid the worst excesses caused by trying to produce an academic or pseudo-academic prose.

Reading student texts that seem disjointed or disjunctive, teachers often make the mistake of thinking that what's missing is enough conjuncts—*and*s and *because*s and *therefore*s and the like, explicit cohesive ties. In their study of strong and poor student writing, Witte and Faigley found that while the good writing did feature more cohesive ties, these ties were most often lexical—that is, the kinds of ties that result from key words in the NP part of sentences that make Tuchman's writing effective. But they also found that "there is no evidence to suggest that a large number (or a small number) of cohesive ties of a particular type will positively affect writing quality [. . .] . Just as exclusive focus on syntax and other formal surface features in writing instruction probably will not better the overall quality of college students' writing, neither will a narrow emphasis on cohesion probably produce significantly improved writing" (202).

While I agree that teaching cohesion as we currently do will not help, sentence focus exercises (which promote lexical cohesion) are helpful. In their simplest form, such exercises involve merely revising a passage for better use of sentence subjects. For example, we would ask students to revise the following passage in order to focus consistently on "the leaders of the American Revolution":

> The leaders of the American Revolution were deeply concerned by many issues that had been controversial in Great Britain before the 1770s. A state-sponsored religion was thought by Adams, Jefferson, and the others to be an intrusion on the right of the individual to his or her own beliefs. The legitimacy of government was believed to be gained from the consent of the governed. Power should not be conferred by one's birth, they felt. And speaking your mind should not result in your getting arrested.

A good revision would look like this:

> The leaders of the American Revolution were deeply concerned by many issues that had been controversial in Great Britain before the 1770s. Adams, Jefferson, and the others thought that a state-sponsored religion was an intrusion on the right of the individual to his or her own beliefs. They believed that government gained its legitimacy from the consent of the governed. They did not believe that power should be conferred by one's birth. And they believed that people should not be arrested for speaking their minds.

Addressing the sentence focus/cohesion issue contextually can produce significant improvements in student writing without the teaching of active and passive voices.

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William S. Robinson was coordinator of composition at San Francisco State University from 1974-91, during which time he created both SFSU’s basic writing and MA composition programs. He has previously published in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* as well as in *College Composition and Communication*, *Composition Chronicle*, and *Syntax in the Schools*. His basic writing textbook, *Texts and Contexts*, is in its fourth edition.

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