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**The Use of Active Voice and Passive in Grant
Applications**

*Barbara Roberts, MA, Grants Development Specialist
Maricopa Community Colleges Foundation*

Abstract

There are significant reasons to develop the skill of writing in active voice for grant development. Passive voice has its place, and it can be an effective way of emphasizing a point, protecting a source, and reporting information, such as in a final grant report. Active voice, on the other hand, enlivens a narrative, draws the reader's attention, clarifies, and uses fewer words and characters, such as when writing to request funding for a project. Both voices are valuable tools in the grant development tool chest. Together they give writers options for presenting agency histories, community needs, project descriptions, goals and objectives, and other application information and for reporting outcomes when grant periods end. Grant professionals will benefit by developing skills in using both verb forms, by using them judiciously, and by using active verb formations more frequently than passive formations.

Introduction

A good writer is a smart writer, choosing exact words to describe a need, a project, and a population. Writers control the tone and expression of their documents, at least in part, by using active voice, passive voice, or a combination of the two. The Writers Handbook, online, defines active voice as writing so that "the subject of the sentence performs the action" and passive voice as when "the subject receives the action."

Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) is a rich resource for information about grammar, syntax, and writing styles. It describes the two voices in the following way:

Active voice is used for most non-scientific writing. Using active voice for the majority of your sentences makes your meaning clear for readers, and keeps the sentences from becoming too complicated or wordy. Even in scientific writing, too much use of passive voice can cloud the meaning of your sentences (2013).

An example of similar sentences comparing active and passive voice are:

Active voice: The agency serves people who have disabilities.

Passive voice: People who have disabilities are served by the agency.

These simple sentences demonstrate the difference between the two voices including that active uses fewer words and characters (seven words; 47 characters) than passive (nine words; 54 characters). In this case, active voice saved two words and seven characters. This is a consistent pattern when comparing active and passive formations.

Benefits of Passive Voice

Sometimes passive voice is advisable (The Writer's Handbook). Although it uses more words, passive voice emphasizes an action over an actor, which is proper when reporting a board or committee action, for example. Standard in scientific writing, researchers report upon actions taken to gather data or to apply theories and about data and outcomes. The researchers themselves are insignificant in the reporting.

There are other instances when passive voice is the superior choice, for example to protect someone's identity. When protecting partners in a final report to a funder, one might write, "The goal was missed because some tasks were not complete at the end of the grant period." This passive construction hides the identity of the actor better than the more explicit active construction, "GLB agency did not hire the new project coordinator for three months into the grant period and therefore, did not recruit the targeted number of clients."

Sometimes passive voice is the choice that makes sense in a particular context. One illustration is if there is no identifiable actor. When describing the need for a community health project for instance, necessity might dictate writing: "Families living downwind from the town have been experiencing increased rates of asthma, cancer, and other lung disorders for six years."

Advantages of Active Voice

Active voice is clear and concise wording. Clarity and brevity have increasing import in writing proposals and applications. This is true, in part, because of word, character, and page limits in online and hard copy letters of inquiry, applications, and reports. Many of those limits are stringent, forcing writers to trim adjectives, lengthy descriptions, and details once considered critical. Limiting the content that applicants supply helps program officers and reviewers minimize the time they devote to reading and evaluating submissions.

Restricting words and characters forces applicant agencies and their writers to create clearer plans, goals, and objectives. It demands they describe their projects and programs, their histories, the needs, and all required sections in well-defined, succinct terms. However, these restrictions have what writers and agencies might consider negative impact. The result is the loss of meta-narrative, the "broader explanation that encompasses the history and beliefs of the writer" (Northrup, 2010). By developing dexterity in using active voice, a writer minimizes character and word counts and potentially benefits by creating additional space to add some meta-narrative.

Active voice uses the sharpest, most efficient language, drawing the reader into a topic by painting a picture. It saves space and meets the needs of modern readers, who want the most information for the smallest investment of time and energy. In “You Won’t Finish This Article,” F. Manjoo describes these readers: “In this age of sound bites and life on hyper-speed, people don’t read, they skim or they begin reading and then lose interest, get interrupted, move on...” (Manjoo, 2013) Although grant reviewers anticipate reading narrative descriptions, and the hope is they will devote complete attention to each proposal, the “new normal” for readers may also impact reviewers’ expectations and reading habits. Therefore, grant professionals must become adept writing in the more compelling active voice, because a reviewer might be a foundation board member, a staff member, a family member, or a community volunteer; and reviewers can be part of Gen X, Gen Y, or the Baby Boomer generation. Active voice reaches out to all readers.

Editing to Transform Passive to Active Voice

When first writing a narrative section of an application, let the words flow. Then the editing begins. Avoiding passive voice necessitates being self-aware, being a good editor, having a good editor, or all three.

As a rule of thumb, if there is a passive construction, simply ask, does this sentence make sense, and is it clearly stated so that any reader would easily follow its rationale? Are there too many characters or words? Is there a better, clearer, briefer way to make the relevant point?

Eliminating passive voice requires awareness of three cues. First, if a sentence describes an action on an actor, such as “Veterans are served by the project,” it is a passive voice construction. At first glance, the word “veterans” appears to be the subject of the sentence, but it is the object of the action. To convert to active voice, rewrite it as “The project serves veterans” reducing six words to four and 34 characters to 27.

Second, look for the word “by.” Something happens to the veterans because of the project. The veterans are served **by** the project. This small word is a potential sign of passive voice.

When reading to identify passive constructions, examine the verb forms looking for participles. This part of English class puts most people to sleep, but it is important for understanding passive voice. A participle is “a form of a verb, often ending in “-ed” or “-ing” and used with auxiliary verbs to make verb tenses, or to form adjectives” (Participle. *Cambridge Dictionary*. N.d.). Examples of auxiliary verbs are: have, is, have been, and were. Examples of their use for passive constructions are: have talked; is talking; have been obtained; were received.

Examples of verb forms are:

Table 1: Regular verbs

Regular Verbs		
Present	Past	Past Participle
Talk	Talked	Talked
Obtain	Obtained	Obtained
Award	Awarded	Awarded

As so often happens with the English language, some verb forms look alike but play more than one role: past tense and past participles appear to be identical in Table 1. Then there are participles that do not have these endings...verbs that are known as “irregular.”

Table 2: Irregular Verbs

Irregular Verbs		
Present	Past	Past Participle
Feed	Fed	Fed
Sing	Sang	Sung
Swim	Swam	Swum

Because irregular verbs appear frequently in English, checking the dictionary is an easy way to verify their forms. An excellent online source specifically listing irregular verbs and their forms is EnglishPage.com, which provides 370 commonly-used English verbs and access to those less-commonly-used.

The easiest approach to taking passive to active is to look for a present or past participle and a form of the verb “to be”:

- The children are swimming and being fed through the club. (10 words; 60 characters)
- All people who come to the shelter have said how grateful they are for the help. (16 words; 81 characters)

Rewrite them to:

- The children swim and eat through the club’s services. (9 words; 56 characters)
- All people who come to the shelter say thank you for the help. (13 words; 64 characters)

Conclusion

Learning to blend the use of active and passive voice can help writers develop more compelling narratives and more succinct reports. Remember that passive is most effective when reporting or creating a more formal tone. Active is most effective when appealing for an emotional connection. Using these two tools wisely will help writers achieve the goal of a given format, whether it is a narrative appeal for funding or a report on a project’s outcomes.

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AUTHOR BIO:

Barbara Roberts is the Grants Development Coordinator for the Maricopa County Community Colleges District Foundation in Arizona and is the GPA Publications Committee Chair. She has 18 years' experience in grant development in many non-profit sectors in Arizona, Ohio, and California and 10 years' experience editing for GPA publications.