

Writing in Active Voice

Writing in the active voice creates powerful and engaging content. The active voice suggests that the written word is "speaking" directly to the reader, enabling the reader to learn quickly, and to take action when an exercise requires it. For technical writing, the active voice is the clearest way to demonstrate action and result, or cause and effect.

Active voice

In the active voice, the subject of the sentence is also the person or thing performing an action.

I compiled the code.

Passive voice

The passive voice is the opposite of active voice. In the passive voice, the subject of the sentence is the person or thing receiving action:

The code was compiled by me.

While the passive voice is not grammatically incorrect, it is less efficient than the active voice and also tends to cause confusion about who is doing what.

Here is another sentence in the passive voice:

A key being pressed prompts the computer to continue.

Is this sentence an instruction telling you to press a key, or is it just a footnote about what happens when a key is pressed?

The active voice is both clearer and more concise:

Press any key to continue.

Writing in the active voice

To use the active voice, write as if you're composing a list of instructions for your reader. You are not writing a description of what the reader *would see* if the reader *were sitting* in front of your computer, seeing what you see as you write. The reader is seeing what is on the reader's own computer screen, and they are doing what you tell them to do.

Here are some examples of sentences written in the passive voice, and how to rewrite them in the active voice:

Passive voice: The values of the XML configuration can be found by parsing the file with the Xerces library in C++.

Active voice: Parse the XML configuration file using the Xerces C++ library.

Passive voice: Open XYZ Viewer by double-clicking the XYZ Tools icon from the workstation desktop.

Active voice: Double-click the XYZ Tools icon on the workstation desktop to open XYZ Viewer.

Passive voice: It was presented earlier in this book the syntax for using XML configuration files with a Python module imported into the PyShadowman code base.

Active voice: The steps to import the required module into PyShadowman were explained in the Importing the BeautifulSoup Module section.

Exercise

Rewrite each paragraph in the active voice.

1. The server got rebooted.
2. The QTextEdit field should be placed in the right corner of the QMain-Window.
3. To begin the code compilation process, GCC is used.
4. The previous three steps should be repeated to complete RHSM registration on each machine.
5. The virtual machine should be started before attempting to ping it.
6. The open source Mumble audio chat application should be used to provide technical support to users.