

What qualities make for a good academic writing?

Instructor: Hongchen Wu

Hongchen.wu@stonybrook.edu

Almost all good writing begins

with terrible first efforts.

You need to start somewhere.

Anne Lamott



Q: How might we describe the difference between these two sentences?

- ((1))Because we knew nothing about local conditions, we could not determine how effectively the committee had allocated funds to areas that most needed assistance.
- ((2))Our lack of knowledge about local conditions precluded Determination of committee action effectiveness in fund allocation to those areas in greatest need of assistance.

Q: Can you make (3) clearer? How?

(3) Decisions in regard to the administration of medication despite the inability of irrational patients voluntarily appearing in Trauma Centers to provide legal consent rest with a physician alone.

A possible way to revise (3):

(3a) When a patient voluntarily appears at a Trauma Center but behaves so irrationally that he cannot legally consent to treatment, only a physician can decide whether to administer medication.

1. To be clear

- revise the abstract nouns into verbs expressing actions;
- make their actors the subjects of those verbs;
- rearrange the events into a chronological sequence.

Action- Actor template

Q: What are the differences between (4) and (5)?

- (4) Despite his knowledge of the need by cities for new revenues for the improvement of their schools, the Governor executed a veto of the budget bill to give encouragement to the cities for an increase of local taxes.
- (5) Though the Governor knew that the cities needed new revenues to improve schools, he vetoed the budget bill because he wanted to encourage cities to increase local taxes.

Q: What are the differences between (4) and (5)?

- (4) Despite his **knowledge** of the **need** by cities for new revenues for the **improvement** of their schools, the Governor executed a **veto** of the budget bill to give **encouragement** to the cities for an **increase** of local taxes.
- (5) Though the Governor **knew** that the cities **needed** new revenues to improve schools, he **vetoed** the budget bill because he wanted to **encourage** cities to **increase** local taxes.

2. Telling stories

- two central components of a story: characters and their actions
- Five “Ws”:
 - What is the story?
 - Which is to say?
 - Who are the characters?
 - What are they doing?
 - How to make it interesting, clear and reader/listener-friendly?

Q: What are the differences between (6) and (7)?

(6) A new approach to toxic waste management detailed in a chemical industry plan will be submitted. A method of decomposing toxic by-products of refinery processes has been discovered by Genco Chemical.

(7) The chemical industry will submit a plan that details a new way to manage toxic waste. Genco Chemical has discovered a way to decompose toxic by-products of refinery processes.

Q: What are the differences between (6) and (7)?

(6) A new approach to toxic waste management detailed in a chemical industry plan **will be submitted**. A method of decomposing toxic by-products of refinery processes **has been discovered** by Genco Chemical.

(7) The chemical industry **will submit** a plan that details a new way to manage toxic waste. Genco Chemical **has discovered** a way to decompose toxic by-products of refinery processes.

3. Passive? Active?

- Active sentences encourage us to name the specific agent of an action and avoid a few extra words.
- Passive reverses the direct order of agent-action-goal.

Q: Is there any case that the passive is, in fact, the better choice?

How about sentences like (8), (9)?

(8) Those who are found guilty of murder can be executed.

(9) Valuable records should always be kept in a fireproof safe.

3. Passive? Active?

- Think about this question:
 - must our audience know who is performing the action?

Recall (8) and (9)

(8) Those who are found guilty of murder can be executed.

(9) Valuable records should always be kept in a fireproof safe.

It's more than mere clarity!

3. Passive? Active?

- Think about these questions:
 - are we maintaining a logically consistent string of subjects?
 - if the string of subjects is consistent, is it the right string of subjects

Q: If the author wants to write about the end of World War II from the point of view of Germany and Japan, do you think (10) is good?

(10) “ By March of 1945, **the Axis nations** had been essentially defeated; all that remained was a final, but bloody, climax. **The borders of Germany** had been breached, and both Germany and Japan were being bombed around the clock. **Neither country**, though, had been so devastated that it could not resist.”

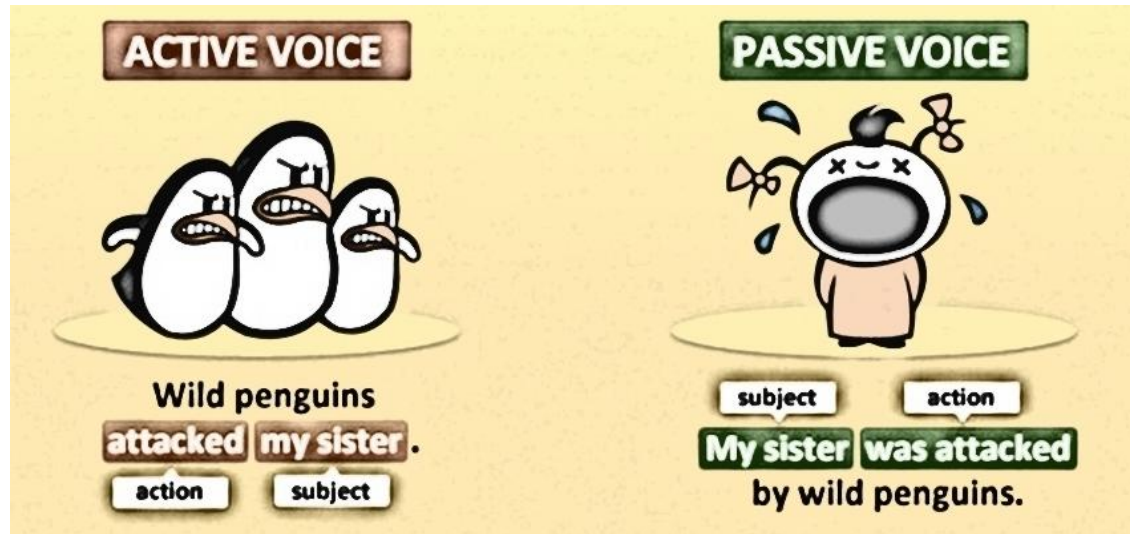
Q: If the author wants to write about the end of World War II from the point of view of Germany and Japan, which one works better?

If the author wants to write about the end of the war from the point of view of the Allied nations, which one should he/she choose?

- (10) By March of 1945, **the Axis nations** had been essentially defeated; all that remained was a final, but bloody, climax. **The borders of Germany** had been breached, and both Germany and Japan were being bombed around the clock. **Neither country**, though, had been so devastated that it could not resist.
- (11) By March of 1945, **the Allies** had essentially defeated the Axis nations; all that remained was a final, but bloody, climax. **American, French, and British forces** had breached the borders of Germany and were bombing both Germany and Japan around the clock. But **they** had not so thoroughly devastated either country as to destroy its ability to resist..

3. Passive? Active?

If someone claims that all good academic writing in all fields must always be impersonally third person, always passive, he is wrong.



4. Shorter? Clearer?

- clear writing does not require Dick-and-Jane sentences
- What counts **is not** the number of words in a sentence, **but how easily** we get from beginning to end while understanding everything in between.



Reference:

- Williams, Joseph M., and Gregory G. Colomb. 1990. *Style: toward clarity and grace*. The University of Chicago Press.