

It was hated to read the passive voice

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Have you been taught to write in the passive voice? Much scientific ‘writing’, especially journal papers and grant applications, uses it. My eyes glaze over often when reading journal papers. Hence this document.

The passive voice, its feeble verbs, and its convoluted constructions kill interest. To show you how, I’ll transform a decent English sentence into the passive voice: *When you read reports in the passive voice, you forget that a human did the experiments and wrote the report.* It is too clear and active! Hide who forgot: *When you read reports in the passive voice, it is forgotten that a human did the experiments and wrote the report.* Then hide the reader: *When reports in the passive voice are read, it is forgotten that a human did the experiments and wrote the report.* Now restore the eliminated information with a ‘by’ construction:

When reports in the passive voice are read by the reader, it is forgotten that a human did the experiments and wrote the report.

To practise this technique, eliminate the two remaining active verbs.

The example illustrates the horrors of the passive voice. Give sentences life! Make each answer: ‘Who did what to whom?’ I’ll think aloud as I rewrite a few sentences drawn from lab reports that I have read.

In a standard circuit diagram, the power inputs are not drawn on for simplicity.

Who choose not to draw them? You! Claim credit: *I left off the power inputs.* Now the reader might wonder why did you do that. To keep the diagram simple. So: *To keep the diagram simple I left off the power inputs.* To duck part of the responsibility, blame the choice on standards:

As is standard, to keep the diagram simple I left off the power inputs.

The work was carried out with the intention of testing and verifying the theory outlined below.

Who carried it out? You:

I did the practical to test and verify the theory outlined later.

Now that the actor is explicit, the reader can respond as a person. If the reader is the lecturer, she knows that you did not test or verify the theory. You know it too: If your results disagree with the theory, would you fail the theory or go to the bench and measure again? So what were you doing in the lab, besides suffering under absurd time pressure? Perhaps learning. Therefore: *I did the practical to learn about the theory outlined later.* For a refinement, explain who outlined the theory:

I did the practical to learn about the theory I outline later.

Previous to this experiment, the functions available when using an oscilloscope and LC circuits (including low-pass and high-pass filters) were studied.

You studied these functions:

Previous to this experiment, I studied the functions available when using an oscilloscope and LC circuits (including low-pass and high-pass filters).

This sentence still needs help. The introductory ‘previous to this experiment’ lends bogus formality to what is simple. Instead:

In the last experiment, I studied the functions available when using an oscilloscope and LC circuits (including low-pass and high-pass filters).

The ‘functions available’ is vague. What did you do? What did you learn? Perhaps:

In the last experiment, I learnt how to use an oscilloscope to study LC circuits, including low-pass and high-pass filters.

You can incorporate the trailing phrase into the main phrase:

In the last experiment, I learnt how to use an oscilloscope to study high- and low-pass LC circuits.

If you are tired of ‘I’ everywhere, make the experiment active:

The last experiment taught me how to use an oscilloscope to study high- and low-pass LC circuits.

Because of time pressure, it was decided to carry on with the experiment and a further amplification of 40 dB was added.

Take responsibility for carrying on and for adding amplification:

Because of time pressure, I decided to carry on with the experiment and added a further amplification of 40 dB.

Now you can remove layers of prepositional indirection: *decided to carry on with*, which has three prepositions! So: *Because of time pressure, I immediately added the further amplification of 40 dB.* The ‘of’ in ‘amplification of 40 dB’ warns you that the phrase is abstract. Use a concrete noun, *amplifier*, to describe what you added: *Because of time pressure, I immediately added the second 40 dB amplifier.* The time pressure is no fact of nature. You could explain its origin:

Because the physics department races us like rats on a treadmill, I could not investigate why the signal was undetectable so I just added the second 40 dB amplifier.

Honesty, sadly, is not often rewarded.

It was confirmed using the earphone that the output was strong enough to be an effective radio receiver.

You confirmed the strength:

I confirmed using the earphone that the output was strong enough to be an effective radio receiver.

It still sounds like official jargon or an airline reservation desk. How did you confirm the strength? By hearing voices or music:

In the earphone I heard music, showing that the output was strong enough to be an effective radio receiver.

The circuit, not the output, is (strong enough to be) the radio receiver. So clarify the last part. Rather, it is redundant so toss it. An awake reader will know that hearing music means that the radio works. So: *In the earphone I heard music.* Or put the earphone later: *I heard music in the earphone.* If you enjoyed building the radio, why not:

I heard music in the earphone!