Plan for the lecture

- **Bossiness**: They smack your hand for doing it—but do it themselves

- **Grammar**: The syntax of English passives

- **Meaning**: The crucial semantic property

- **Dishonesty**: Flagrant cheating by Strunk and White

- **Ignorance**: Clueless finger-waggers

- **Allegations**: Supposedly bad properties

- **Conclusions**: what to do about it all
Prejudice, bullying, and bossiness

- “Use the active voice”

  [William Strunk, *The Elements of Style* (1918)]
Prejudice, bullying, and bossiness

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- “Never use the passive where you can use the active”
  [George Orwell, ‘Politics and the English language’ (1946)]
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“As a rule, avoid the passive voice”
[Foerster and Steadman, *Writing and Thinking* (1931)]
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  [Rebecca Johnson, Twitter, October 2012]
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- “I’d love to eradicate the passive voice from the earth... Kill the passive voice.”
  [Rebecca Johnson, Twitter, October 2012]

- “A sentence written in passive voice is the shifty desperado who tries to win the gunfight by shooting the sheriff in the back, stealing his horse, and sneaking out of town”
  [Sherry Roberts, in *11 Ways to Improve Your Writing and Your Business* (1992)]
Writer, heal thyself

Do these fiercely prejudiced writing advisers themselves avoid the passive construction?
Writer, heal thyself

Do these fiercely prejudiced writing advisers themselves avoid the passive construction?

No. They use it copiously — more than most people do. Take Orwell, for example.

Typical prose:

Merriam-Webster count: \(\sim 13\%\) of transitive verbs
My count: \(\sim 17\%\) of transitive verbs

Orwell’s ‘Politics and the English language’:

Merriam-Webster count: \(\sim 20\%\) of transitive verbs
My count: \(\sim 26\%\) of transitive verbs
Writing advice from a friend

A friend, ‘FC’, advising me on my writing:

I was introduced to her while she was visiting California.

Why the passive? What’s wrong with ‘We met…’?
Writing advice from a friend

A friend, ‘FC’, advising me on my writing:

I was introduced to her while she was visiting California.

Why the passive? What’s wrong with ‘We met. . . ’?

But all plans were disrupted when in December she was diagnosed with metastasized and inoperable terminal cancer.

Again, this is passive voice. Maybe appropriate here, I guess, but in general, I try to avoid the passive.
Writing advice from a friend

Does FC really try to avoid the passive?
Writing advice from a friend

**Does FC really try to avoid the passive?**

FC made a mistake. She *published a book*. A very good one. I checked the Preface:

Total transitive verbs: 137

As head of a passive clause: 36

Percent of transitives in the passive: **26%**

The same remarkably high percentage as in Orwell’s essay!
E. B. White’s record on using the active voice

What about Strunk & White? Here’s the beginning of E. B. White’s Introduction to his revision of Strunk:

At the close of the first World War, when I was a student at Cornell, I took a course called English 8. My professor was William Strunk Jr. A textbook required for the course was a slim volume called *The Elements of Style*, whose author was the professor himself. The year was 1919. The book was known on the campus in those days as “the little book,” with the stress on the word “little.” It had been privately printed by the author.
Bossiness and prejudice against the passive

Here are the passive clauses marked in red:

AT THE close of the first World War, when I was a student at Cornell, I took a course called English 8. My professor was William Strunk Jr. A textbook required for the course was a slim volume called *The Elements of Style*, whose author was the professor himself. The year was 1919. The book was known on the campus in those days as “the little book,” with the stress on the word “little.” It had been privately printed by the author.

5 transitive verbs of which 4 are in passive clauses: 80%!
Tentative conclusion:

This ‘do as I say, not as I do’
that we’re seeing here
really calls for some attention
and analysis.
The grammar of the English passive

But first: what exactly are we being warned against?
The grammar of the English passive

But first: what exactly are we being warned against?

Passive constructions use a **participial** verb form to express an **inverse** of a **binary relation** that the verb normally expresses.
The grammar of the English passive

But first: what exactly are we being warned against?

Passive constructions use a **participial** verb form to express an **inverse** of a **binary relation** that the verb normally expresses.

Example: *hit* normally has hitter as subject, sufferer as object:

Active:  *Bombs*  *hit*  *Tripoli*  (about bombs)

Passive:  *Tripoli*  *hit*  *by bombs*  (about Tripoli)
The grammar of the English passive

Another example: *nibble* normally has the nibbler as subject and the nibbled item as object:

**Active:**  
*Ducks nibble grammarian to death*  
(about ducks)

**Passive:**  
*Grammarian nibbled to death by ducks*  
(about a grammarian)
How to construct a passive clause

Take an VP with some complement NP in it (as an object or the complement in a PP):

```
write to [NP the authorities] about [NP it]
```
How to construct a passive clause

Take an VP with some complement NP in it (as an object or the complement in a PP):

\[
\text{write to } [\text{NP the authorities }] \text{ about } [\text{NP it }]
\]

Choose an NP that is closely bound to the verb semantically (the absentee):

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\text{write to } [\text{NP the authorities }] \text{ about } [\text{NP it }]
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Remove the absentee NP:

\[ \text{write to [NP the authorities] about it} \]
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Choose a participial for the verb:

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How to construct a passive clause

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Remove the absentee NP:

\[ \text{write to } [\text{NP the authorities }] \text{ about it} \]

Choose a participial for the verb:

\[ \text{written to } \underline{\text{__}} \text{ about it} \]

The result is a short bare passive VP.
How to construct a passive clause

Putting a bare passive VP together with a subject NP makes a **bare passive clause**. It may be ‘short’, with no *by*-phrase:

*That said, it is important to stress that there are also disadvantages.*

Or it may be ‘long’, with a *by*-headed PP that *CGEL* calls the **passive complement**:

*She stood near the french windows,*  
*her golden hair illuminated by the sunlight.*
The grammar of the English passive

There are various options for modification and deployment of passive VPs:

- with passive complement (*nibbled to death by ducks*) or without (*nibbled to death*)
The grammar of the English passive

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- past participle (*needs to be washed*) or gerund-participle (*needs washing*)
- complement of intransitive verb (*seemed unharmed by it*; *went unattended to*) or of transitive (*got herself [*VP arrested by the FBI*]; *had the kitchen [*VP completely remodelled]*)
The grammar of the English passive
24 passive constructions

In all we have 24 constructions reasonably called passives:

1. *Lucy was examined by the doctor.* [LCN]
2. *Lucy was examined.* [SCN]
3. *Lucy was looked at by the doctor.* [LCP]
4. *Lucy was looked at.* [SCP]
5. *Lucy got examined by the doctor.* [LIN]
6. *Lucy got examined.* [SIN]
The grammar of the English passive
24 passive constructions

7. Lucy got looked at by the doctor. [LIP]

8. Lucy got looked at. [SIP]

9. The parents had Lucy examined by the doctor. [LTN]

10. The parents had Lucy examined. [STN]

11. The parents had Lucy looked at by the doctor. [LTP]

12. The parents had Lucy looked at. [STP]
The grammar of the English passive
24 passive constructions

13 Lucy was unexamined by the doctor. [LCAN]

14 Lucy was unexamined. [SCAN]

15 Lucy was unlooked at by the doctor. [LCAP]

16 Lucy was unlooked at. [LCAN]

17 Lucy went unexamined by the doctor. [LGAN]

18 Lucy went unexamined. [SGAN]
### The grammar of the English passive
24 passive constructions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Lucy went unlooked at by the doctor.</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lucy went unlooked at.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lucy needs examining by the doctor.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lucy needs examining.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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The semantic properties of the English passive

\[ [\text{VP write to the authorities about GM}] \quad \text{— property of a sender} \]

\[ \lambda x[\ldots x \ldots] \]
The semantic properties of the English passive

\[ \text{write to the authorities about GM} \] — property of a sender
\[ \lambda x[\ldots x \ldots] \]

\[ \text{written to } \_ \_ \_ about GM \] — property of a recipient
\[ \lambda y[\exists x[\ldots, y, \ldots x, \ldots]] \] (message author unspecified)
A **passive complement** has the form \([\text{PP by NP}]\)

Given any short bare passive VP, adding a passive complement subconstituent makes a **long bare passive VP**.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{[VP write to } b \text{ about } GM ]& \quad \text{— property of a sender} \\
\lambda x[\ldots, b, \ldots x, \ldots] & \\
\text{[VP written to } \_ \text{ about } GM \text{ by } b ]& \quad \text{— property of a recipient} \\
\lambda y[\exists x[\ldots, y, \ldots x, \ldots] \land (x = b)] & \text{ (and } b \text{ wrote it)}
\end{align*}
\]
The information-structure properties of passives

Information-packaging constraint on passives:

The denotation of the passive complement NP must not denote anything older in the discourse than the Subject.
The information-structure properties of passives

Information-packaging constraint on passives:

The denotation of the passive complement NP must **not** denote anything **older in the discourse than the Subject**.

*Have you heard the news about Microsoft?*

*They purchased Skype.*

(not a passive)
The information-structure properties of passives

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*Have you heard the news about Microsoft?*
*They purchased Skype.* (not a passive)

*Have you heard the news about Skype?*
*They were purchased by Microsoft.* ←–Subject = old, by-NP = new
The information-structure properties of passives

Information-packaging constraint on passives:

The denotation of the passive complement NP must **not** denote anything older in the discourse than the Subject.

**Have you heard the news about Microsoft?**
*They purchased Skype.*

(not a passive)

**Have you heard the news about Skype?**
*They were purchased by Microsoft.*

Subject = old, by-NP = new

???
*Skype was purchased by them.*

Subject = new, them = old!
The information-structure properties of passives

A man walks into a bar leading a bear on a chain.
He orders a beer and a pot of honey.
(normal active)
The information-structure properties of passives

A man walks into a bar leading a bear on a chain. He orders a beer and a pot of honey. (normal active)

A man walks into a bar leading a bear on a chain. A beer and a pot of honey are ordered by him. ← subject newer!
The information-structure properties of passives

A man walks into a bar leading a bear on a chain.
He orders a beer and a pot of honey.  
(normal active)

A man walks into a bar leading a bear on a chain.
A beer and a pot of honey are ordered by him.
← subject newer!

A man walks into a bar leading a bear on a chain.
He says to the barman, ‘Give me a beer and a pot of honey.’
So a beer and a pot of honey are handed to him by the barman.
(OK; Subject and by-NP both old)
The information-structure properties of passives

A man walks into a bar leading a bear on a chain. He orders a beer and a pot of honey. (normal active)

A man walks into a bar leading a bear on a chain. A beer and a pot of honey are ordered by him. ←subject newer!

A man walks into a bar leading a bear on a chain. He says to the barman, ‘Give me a beer and a pot of honey.’ So a beer and a pot of honey are handed to him by the barman. (OK; Subject and by-NP both old)

The newness constraint is relative: passive complements can be discourse-old, but not when the Subject is new.
A dishonest critique of the passive

Now consider William Strunk’s introduction of passives in the section ‘Use the active voice’ in *The Elements of Style*:

*I shall always remember my first visit to Boston.*

???

*My first visit to Boston will always be remembered by me.*
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This **flagrantly violates the discourse-new condition**
(because speaker and addressee are **always** discourse-old)
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???

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What about **properly discourse-situated** passives? Are they unacceptable too?

We never find out, because of Strunk & White’s apparent incompetence.
What Strunk & White say, after admitting that passives are sometimes acceptable:

“The habitual use of the active voice . . . makes for forcible writing. . . . Many a tame sentence of description or exposition can be made lively and emphatic by substituting a transitive in the active voice for some such perfunctory expression as there is or could be heard.”
Strunk & White’s cluelessness

From the 4th edition of *The Elements of Style*

There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground.  
At dawn the crowing of a rooster could be heard.  
The reason that he left college was that his health became impaired.  
It was not long before she was very sorry that she had said what she had.  

Dead leaves covered the ground.  
The cock’s crow came with dawn.  
Failing health compelled him to leave college.  
She soon repented her words.  

[S & W, 4th ed., p. 19]
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The cock’s crow came with dawn.
Failing health compelled him to leave college.
She soon repented her words.

Only one example on the left has a passive; its ‘correction’ does not have a transitive verb.

NOT ONE of the four examples illustrates changing a passive to an active transitive!
Ignorant critiques of the passive

This brings us to ignorance and incompetence.
Ignorant critiques of the passive

This brings us to ignorance and incompetence.

Recall (from this morning’s lecture) this wonderful example of writing instruction at a top private East Coast university in America...
A TA tries in vain to identify the hated passive

What Innocent never mentions in his writing is that the Church at the time faced more opposition than perhaps it cared to admit. Innocent didn’t enjoy the security that his writing made it seem that he did. The goal of Henry VI had been to control Italy. The papacy did its best to prevent this by refusing to crown Henry emperor unless he promised not to control Italy. Henry was obviously very interested in doing so, but died before his plans could come to fruition.

Innocent was quite brilliantly using the vacancy in the emperor’s throne to try to place the church back into assured power, by stepping in to control who would become pope, almost exactly what Henry IV had done in 1075.

Innocent was also reluctant to mention the position in which heresy was putting the church. It was relatively easy to stomp out a few flames of nonbelievers, but lately more and more people were opposing the official viewpoint in one way or another. Innocent saw his people taken from him by the Waldensian heresy and the Albigensian, or Cathar, heresy. People began to realize that the church was corrupt, that church practices were more and more motivated by
More passive allegations

I will now go through a rather frightening number of examples from
— grammar snobs,
— writing critics,
— pompous columnists,
— etc.

of people **alleging passives where there are no passives.**
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— grammar snobs,
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of people alleg ing passives where there are no passives.

FASTEN YOUR SEATBELTS;
IT’S GOING TO BE A BUMPY RIDE.
Bias in Reuters headlines?

Reuters headlines alleged by ‘Honest Reporting’ in 2003 to be using passive voice to mask Palestinian responsibility:
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Reuters headlines alleged by ‘Honest Reporting’ in 2003 to be using passive voice to mask Palestinian responsibility:

— “New West Bank Shooting Mars Truce” (July 1) Palestinian not named as perpetrator; Israeli not named as victim; shooting described in passive voice.
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— “New West Bank Shooting Mars Truce” (July 1) *Palestinian not named as perpetrator; Israeli not named as victim; shooting described in passive voice*. ←NO!!
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— “Bus Blows Up in Central Jerusalem” (June 11) *Palestinian not named as perpetrator; Israelis not named as victims; described in passive voice*. ← NO!!

— “Israeli Girl Killed, Fueling Cycle of Violence” (June 18) (passive; Palestinian not named as perpetrator)

Correct! Overall mark: 33% — fail. (We shall see much worse!)
Steve Inskeep interviewing U.S. Army General Dan McNeill (NATO commander, Afghanistan) on National Public Radio (USA) in 2007:

Let’s put it in the **passive** tense: there was a ceasefire agreement in Southern Afghanistan with some members of the Taliban at one time.
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**NO!!** The passive is not a tense, and *there was a ceasefire agreement* is not a passive clause.
A plugin to spot passives?

Jon Fine, in a (rather credulous) article in *Business Week*, says the ‘SpinSpotter’ plugin for the Firefox browser will identify

---

**passive voice**

(example: a story says “bombs land” without stating which party is responsible for them)
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\[\text{passive voice} \leftrightarrow \text{NO!!}\]

(example: a story says “bombs land” without stating which party is responsible for them)

*Bombs land* is an active clause.
The BBC on school shooting stories

Tim Levell, on how the BBC writes up stories about school shootings in a sensitive way:

We use **passive constructions**
(“Five girls have died”, not “The man went in and shot five girls”)


The BBC on school shooting stories

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We use **passive constructions** ←**NO!!**

(“Five girls have died”, not “The man went in and shot five girls”)

The BBC on school shooting stories

Tim Levell, on how the BBC writes up stories about school shootings in a sensitive way:

We use passive constructions ← NO!!
("Five girls have died", not "The man went in and shot five girls")

*Five girls have died* is not passive.
Obama’s passive presidency?

From a blog discussion of Paul JJ Payack’s claims about the 2008 vice presidential debates in the USA:

Though most of Obama’s verbs were in the active voice, 11 percent of the sentences were in the passive voice, a dependable method of deflecting responsibility, Payack said. He cited Obama’s “There will be setbacks and false starts” as an example. “He’s spreading the responsibility around,” Payack said. “He didn’t say, ’I will have setbacks. I will be wrong. I will make mistakes.’ He used the passive voice for those types of constructions.”
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NO!! *There will be setbacks and false starts* is not a passive—it’s an existential clause.
Palin’s passive manner?

‘Ivenson’, on the Wonkette site, talking about Sarah Palin:

Gave up when she said “you guys are wanting to dissect the past.” Awful passive voice manner of speech . . .
Palin’s passive manner?

‘Ivenson’, on the Wonkette site, talking about Sarah Palin:

Gave up when she said “you guys are wanting to dissect the past.” Awful passive voice manner of speech... ←NO!!

There is no “passive voice manner of speech”, and you guys are wanting to dissect the past is active voice anyway.
Letter from Dave Bruce of Hoboken to the public editor of *The New York Times*, about a correction to a Maureen Dowd column:

The passive-voice note that she “failed to attribute a paragraph” seems to play down what actually occurred.
A passive apology?

Letter from Dave Bruce of Hoboken to the public editor of *The New York Times*, about a correction to a Maureen Dowd column:

The passive-voice note that she “failed to attribute a paragraph” seems to play down what actually occurred.

**NO!!** *Maureen Dowd’s column failed to attribute a paragraph* is in the active voice.
Another passive apology?

Marie Murray, in ‘The passive voice is the penultimate weapon of denial’, *The Irish Times*, 31 July 2009:

The **passive voice** is especially useful where apologies are required: personal apologies for what people have done personally. Because instead of having to say, “I’m sorry”, the **passive voice** allows a culprit to say “It is regrettable”. Instead of saying “I made a mistake” the abstract term “mistakes happened” can be evoked.
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**NO!!** Neither *it is regrettable* nor *mistakes happened* is a passive.
In *The Aspen Handbook for Legal Writers* by Deborah E. Bouchoux, the following tip appears:

“Most sentences that include dangling modifiers are written in the passive voice. Changing to active voice corrects the dangling modifier because an actor or subject is identified in the phrase that begins the sentence.

Example:
When a boy, my father changed careers (passive voice).
When I was a boy, my father changed careers (active voice, actor identified in modifying phrase).”
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When a boy, my father changed careers (passive voice). ←NO!!
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Charles Krauthammer on the passive

Charles Krauthammer, described by the *Financial Times* in 2006 as the most influential commentator in America, in a *Time* magazine column on Obama being soft with the Muslims:

On religious tolerance, he gently referenced the Christians of Lebanon and Egypt, then lamented that the ‘divisions between Sunni and Shia have led to tragic violence’ (note the use of the passive voice).
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On religious tolerance, he gently referenced the Christians of Lebanon and Egypt, then lamented that the ‘divisions between Sunni and Shia have led to tragic violence’ (note the use of the passive voice). ←NO!!

*Divisions between Sunni and Shia have led to tragic violence* is not in the passive voice.
Nancy Franklin in *The New Yorker* commenting on fraudster Bernie Madoff’s remark about his Ponzi scheme, “I believed it would end soon”:

…he betrayed no sense of how absurd it was to use the passive voice in regard to his scheme, as if it were a spell of bad weather that had descended on him.
Nancy Franklin on the passive

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…he betrayed no sense of how absurd it was to use the passive voice in regard to his scheme, as if it were a spell of bad weather that had descended on him.

**NO!!**  *It will end soon* is **not** in the passive voice.
More failing students of the passive

The *BBC News Style Guide* enlightens us:

Compare these examples. The first is in the **passive**, the second **active**:

- There were riots in several towns in Northern England last night, in which police clashed with stone-throwing youths.
- Youths throwing stones clashed with police during riots in several towns in Northern England last night.
More failing students of the passive

From the *BBC News Style Guide*:

Compare these examples. The first is in the **passive**, the second active:

- There were riots in several towns in Northern England last night, in which police clashed with stone-throwing youths. ←**NO!!**
- Youths throwing stones clashed with police during riots in several towns in Northern England last night.

The first sentence is **not** a passive.
More failing students of the passive

From the *Canadian Press Stylebook* (the standard usage guide for all working journalists in Canada) under “Common faults”:

**Active vs. passive**
Think of active verbs as power words — words that drive your sentences, keep the reader’s attention and move her briskly along.

**Not:** The economy experienced a quick revival.
More failing students of the passive

From the *Canadian Press Stylebook* (the standard usage guide for all working journalists in Canada) under “Common faults”:

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**Not:** The economy experienced a quick revival. ←NO!!

**But:** The economy revived quickly.
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*Not:* The economy experienced a quick revival. ←**NO!!**

*But:* The economy revived quickly.

*Not:* At first light there was no sign of the ship.
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**Not:** The economy experienced a quick revival. ←**NO!!**

**But:** The economy revived quickly.

**Not:** At first light there was no sign of the ship. ←**NO!!**

**But:** The ship vanished in the night.
Now some light relief with a cartoon

←**NO!!**

“Has occurred” is not a passive.
Now back to business...

From the style guide of a large corporation:

Use active voice rather than passive voice.
Active voice is easier to read.
Instead of “we have decided,”
write “we decided.”
Instead of “we will be implementing
a program,” write “we are implementing.”
More failing students of the passive

From the style guide of a large corporation:

Use active voice rather than passive voice. Active voice is easier to read.
Instead of “we have decided,” ←NO!! write “we decided.”
Instead of “we will be implementing ←NO!! a program,” write “we are implementing.”

Neither *have decided* nor will be implementing is a passive. The writer seems to have confused ‘passive’ with ‘contains an auxiliary verb’!

[Grade: 0 out of 2.]
Help on depassivising your resumé

The Doostang job-search platform and advice service listing examples of the passive voice that you should expunge from your resumé:

Indicators of the passive voice:
• Responsible for
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Indicators of the passive voice:

- Responsible for ← NO!!
- Duties included

They say Responsible for management of three direct reports is worse than Managed 3 direct reports ("It is a shorter, more direct mode of writing and adds impact").

None of the four examples fingered are passives. [Grade: 0 out of 4.]
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Brad DeLong, the well known blogger, listing uses of the passive in (a translation of) a passage by Wolfgang Mommsen:

*the misfortune that befell Germany and Europe...*
A case of zero out of 5

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the misfortune that befell Germany and Europe . . . ← NO!!
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\text{the misfortune that befell Germany and Europe} \ldots \leftarrow \text{NO!!}
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\[
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*the misfortune that befell Germany and Europe*. . . ←NO!!

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*the war turned out to be… ← NO!!*

*the… situation that isolated Germany… ← NO!!*

*It was above all the bloody reckoning… ← NO!!*

None of these five examples are uses of the passive!

[Grade: 0 out of 5.]
First Read, a reliable purveyor of Beltway conventional wisdom, tries out the passive voice: “As for the media, we’ve allowed this story over race [to] bury one of the more consequential weeks of Obama’s presidency thus far (the financial reform legislation becoming law, Senate passage of the jobless benefits, and Kagan clearing the Senate Judiciary Committee). Whether it’s Sherrod, Gates, or Jeremiah Wright, the topic of race pushes the media’s buttons like no other issue.”
And another zero out of 5

From the group blog of *The American Prospect* in July 2007:

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**NO!!** There are no passives at all among the five lexical verbs in the quotation (*allowed*, *bury*, *becoming*, *clearing*, *pushes*). [Grade: 0 out of 5.]
The state of knowledge about what is passive and what is not, among those educated enough to be writing for publication, is disastrous.
A general conclusion

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Notice, it is not me making a big deal out of this; it’s the soi-disant grammar gurus and writing critics.
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I’m merely saying that people who claim that the passive is evil should

- have some definition of the notion ‘passive’;
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I’m merely saying that people who claim that the passive is evil should

- have some definition of the notion ‘passive’;
- cite examples that satisfy their definition; and
- justify their claims about what is wrong with the examples.
The style allegations against the passive

But the claims are never justified. Passives are alleged to be

- dull or boring
- sneaky or evasive
- wimpy rather than bold
- avoided by good writers

All the allegations are unsupported, and to some extent clearly false.
Wikipedia begins the ‘Assassination’ section of its article on John F. Kennedy thus:

*President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, at 12:30 pm Central Standard Time on November 22, 1963…*

The statement is as vivid and shocking as you could imagine.

And with Kennedy as the topic of the entire article, having his name as the subject like this is clearly the best stylistic option.
Sneaky or evasive?

This astonishing quotation was given earlier:

A sentence written in the active voice is the straight-shooting sheriff who faces the gunslinger proudly and fearlessly. It is honest, straightforward; you know where you stand. . . .

A sentence written in passive voice is the shifty desperado who tries to win the gunfight by shooting the sheriff in the back, stealing his horse, and sneaking out of town.

(Sherry Roberts, *11 Ways to Improve* . . . Ch 7, ‘Be Active’)

**Act:** The committee will review all applications in early April.

**Pas:** In early April, all applications will be reviewed by the committee.

*Saying what will happen to the applications is sneaky??*
Wimpy, not bold?

Two things are being presupposed when passives are decried as wimpy, cowardly, and weak, rather than bold, muscular, and strong:

(i) the **standard prejudice** that there is something weak about *The World Trade Center has been attacked by terrorists* as compared to *Terrorists have attacked the World Trade Center*; and
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(ii) the **unspoken assumption** that in every kind of writing the right style is bold, muscular, and strong (rather than, say, subtle, delicate, and restrained)
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The two are quite independent.

But both seem to lack any vestige of support.
Wimpy, not bold?

Is the passive avoided by good writers of what might be thought of as tough, muscular prose?
Wimpy, not bold?

Is the passive avoided by good writers of what might be thought of as tough, muscular prose?

Let’s take a look at a truly classic example of tough-guy writing style: the opening of the Anthony Award-winning first Jack Reacher novel by Lee Child, *Killing Floor.*
Wimpy, not bold?

KILLING FLOOR

CHAPTER ONE

I was arrested in Eno's diner. At twelve o'clock. I was eating eggs and drinking coffee. A late breakfast, not lunch. I was wet and tired after a long walk in heavy rain. All the way from the highway to the edge of town.

The diner was small, but bright and clean. Brand-new, built to resemble a converted railroad car. Narrow, with a long lunch counter on one side and a
Avoided by fine writers?

What about older literature? Who do you want to pick?
Avoided by fine writers?

What about older literature? Who do you want to pick?

How about H. G. Wells, the inventor of modern science fiction?
Avoided by fine writers?

What about older literature? Who do you want to pick?

How about H. G. Wells, the inventor of modern science fiction?

No one would have believed in the last years of the nineteenth century that this world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man’s and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinised and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinise the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water.

[Opening of Wells’ *The War of the Worlds*; 50% passives]
Avoided by fine writers?

Who do you want to pick?
Avoided by fine writers?

Who do you want to pick?

How about George Orwell (best English writer in Simon Heffer’s opinion), the man who said “Never use the passive where you can use the active”?
Avoided by fine writers?

Who do you want to pick?

How about George Orwell (best English writer in Simon Heffer’s opinion), the man who said “Never use the passive where you can use the active”?

It was in Burma, a sodden morning of the rains... We were waiting outside the condemned cells... In some of them brown silent men were squatting at the inner bars, with their blankets draped round them. These were the condemned men, due to be hanged within the next week or two.

One prisoner had been brought out of his cell.

[Opening of Orwell’s *A hanging*; 100% passives]
Avoided by fine writers?

WHY ARE WE EVEN DOING THIS?
WHY ARE WE EVEN DOING THIS?

Nobody who can tell passives from actives could read literary works closely and still imagine that fine writers were avoiding the passive.

Orwell tells us not to use the passive, and then opens a famous essay with 100% passives in the first five sentences.

The whole business of evaluating such claims is demeaning and ridiculous.
Avoided by fine writers?

What we’re seeing is

- unneeded warnings against sentences that have nothing wrong with them
- handed out by people who don’t know how to identify instances of what they’re warning against
- to tutor or intimidate people who don’t know enough grammar to reject the nonsense they are being offered.

It’s the blind warning the blind about a danger that isn’t there.
Why did this all happen?

What is going on is a special case of two zero-tolerance principles noted by Arnold Zwicky:

**ZT-1:** *IF THEY DO IT TOO MUCH, THEY SHOULD BE TOLD NOT TO DO IT AT ALL*

**ZT-2:** *IF DOING IT SOMETIMES GETS THEM IN TROUBLE, THEY SHOULD BE TOLD NOT TO DO IT AT ALL*
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It is right and proper and good that student writers should have instruction in how to write well.

But far too often they are handed utterly simplistic prescriptions that are far too general.
‘Avoid the passive’ is a stock cliché of stupid writing advice.
Conclusions

- ‘Avoid the passive’ is a stock cliché of stupid writing advice.

- The advice-givers don’t respect their own counsel: They use the passive **more** than other writers.
‘Avoid the passive’ is a stock cliché of stupid writing advice.

The advice-givers don’t respect their own counsel: They use the passive more than other writers.

But they don’t know that: they are hopeless at distinguishing passives from actives.
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- The poor students can’t identify passives either, so they don’t spot the blunders of their teachers.

- The claims about why the passive is bad are all bogus.
Conclusions

Should we laugh or cry?

Neither.

Don’t laugh, don’t cry; get out there and fight the ignorant nonsense about English grammar that grammar bullies and usage gurus hand out.
The End

THANK YOU!