On the Myth that Passives are Wordy[*]

Geoffrey K. Pullum
University of Edinburgh

Few of the unpopular positions I have from time to time espoused in my writings about English grammar have attracted more hostility than my defense of passive-voice constructions. I have written about passives dozens of times on Language Log, and several times on Lingua Franca, a group blog about language and writing maintained by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

I have also published a journal article in *Language and Communication* (**37**, 60–74 [2014]) in which I describe the English passive, highlight the ignorance of those who so often allege people are writing passives when they're not, and rebut the arguments given against using passives.

The trouble is, the sort of people who want to ban passives from other people's prose do not want to see literary evidence and will not pay attention to linguistic arguments. One Lingua Franca commenter back in 2011 ignored the substance of my post entirely and simply asserted (in an ungrammatical run-on sentence):

[1]   Passive writing breeds passive thinking and behaving, for this reason I completely disagree with Professor Pullum.

That was all: no reason, no response to the argument I gave, just total disagreement prefaced by an unsupported assertion that your writing style can afflict your thought and even your behaviour.

Recently I touched on the topic again, pointing out that William Zinsser, in his celebrated book *On Writing Well*, raves about how dreadful the passive is (indeed, he positively froths at the mouth on the topic), but utterly ignores his own advice: he gets no further than the second sentence of his introduction before he uses a passive clause that could easily have been replaced by an active one (not that there was any reason to make such a replacement). Yet one of the earliest commenters, operating under the sobriquet '**redweather**', said this:

[2]   Passive verb constructions litter the writing my freshman composition students submit. They result in wordiness which, in turn, results in my not wanting to read what my students submit. Zinsser and others are right to proscribe their use.

Bald assertions again. And he actually says "proscribe": these people want passive constructions to be not just discouraged but forbidden!

At least **redweather** cite a specific reason: passives "result in wordiness." But is this true? It is a common allegation among those who dislike passives. I took a closer look at

it recently after a professor of accounting who wrote to me by fax (I'll refer to him as Faxman) to insist that avoiding the passive "saves words," which in turn "reduces demands on cognition, which makes the reader's job easier." He cited an example (from a paper of mine) in which a passive has 22 percent more words than its active counterpart; "and you don't remark on that," he observes.

He's right, I don't remark on it. And there's a reason. The maximum number of words you can save changing a passive like [3a] into its active counterpart [3b] is two.

[3] a. *Madagascar was originally settled by migrants from Indonesia.*

b. *Migrants from Indonesia originally settled Madagascar.*

If the passive is a **long passive**, with the agent expressed, you lose the preposition *by*; and if the passive is of the kind that has an instance of the copular verb *be*, you eliminate that.

But the majority of the passives found in most kinds of text are **short passives**, with the agent unexpressed. For those, changing them into active form typically calls for adding a new subject, which either keeps the word-count the same or increases it.

And plenty of passives do not contain an instance of the verb *be*: there are passive clauses (underlined) in these sentences:

[4] a. *I had this <u>made for me by a joiner</u>.*

b. *I nearly got myself <u>arrested for vagrancy</u>.*

c. *Anyone <u>surprised by this result</u> should take a look at the data.*

But concentrate for the moment on examples that have both a *be* and a *by*, like these:

[5] a. Active: *John loves Mary.* (3 words)
         Passive: *Mary is loved by John.* (5 words)
         Additional words, expressed as a percentage: 2/3 = 67%

b. Active: *All cows eat grass.* (4 words)
         Passive: *Grass is eaten by all cows.* (6 words)
         Additional words, expressed as a percentage: 2/4 = 50%

c. Active: *Pigs always enjoy eating acorns.* (5 words)
         Passive: *Eating acorns is always enjoyed by pigs.* (7 words)
         Additional words, expressed as a percentage: 2/5 = 40%

d. Active: *Some people absolutely loathe New York.* (6 words)
         Passive: *New York is absolutely loathed by some people.* (8 words)
         Additional words, expressed as a percentage: 2/6 = 33%

So it goes on: for 7 words, under 29%; for 8 words, 25%; for 9 words, 22%; for 10 words, 20%... The longer the sentence is, the smaller the reduction in word count achieved by getting rid of passives.

In fact as sentence length continues on its never-ending journey toward infinity, the percentage saving by not using a passive construction gets closer and closer to zero.

Some back-of-envelope calculations will show in more detail why changing passives to actives in a typical text saves only a trivial number of words. Assume an average sentence length of 20 words (which is about right for nonfiction writing), so we have about 50 sentences in each 1,000 words.

Sentences can have more than one clause, and any clause might have a transitive head verb usable in a passive construction. Let's assume that each sentence has on average two passivizable transitive verbs (that is actually very generous). In each 1,000 words, then, we'll assume there might be 100 potentially passivizable verbs.

In typical prose only about 12 or 13 percent of those verbs will head passive clauses; but since Faxman is concerned with writing that overuses the passive, let's assume that in each 1,000 words there will be 15 verbs heading passive clauses.

Of those 15, only some will be long passives, with a *by*-phrase. My investigations suggest it may be 5 percent or even below that. But let's be generous again, and not just double that but quadruple it: we'll assume, implausibly, that 20 percent of the 15 verbs are heads of long passives. That makes three long passives per 1,000 words.

We should keep in mind that short passives typically yield either no saving or an actual increase: changing [6a] to [6b] doesn't alter the word count, and using [6c] instead actually increases the word count from 5 to 7.

[6] a. *In 1963 Kennedy was assassinated.*

  b. *In 1963 someone assassinated Kennedy.*

  c. *In 1963 Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated Kennedy.*

Under the assumptions just made, we would save six words per 1,000 words of text. As a percentage, the shrinkage of typical text will thus amount **at most 0.6 percent**.

In practice it will be far less. Matt Keefe (personal communication) undertood a small experiment by examining the first 100 clauses in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. He wanted to see whether there were any passives (for this is the same George Orwell, you will recall, who wrote "Never use the passive where you can use the active" in his essay 'Politics and the English language'), and if so, whether replacing them by actives would save any words. The results are remarkable. There are 9 passive clauses. Not a single one of them is a long passive. And replacing them by appropriate synonymous actives often results in worse and more cumbersome prose, and yields a net result that the net number of words saved is zero.

To illustrate, consider the passage in [7a], in which I underline the head verbs of the three passive clauses. To convert it fully into the active voice we would need to replace it by something like [7b] (where the same verbs are underlined); and this is actually one word longer.

[7] a. *Old Major (so he was always called, though the name under which he had been exhibited was Willingdon Beauty) was so highly regarded on the farm that everyone was quite ready to lose an hour's sleep in order to hear what he had to say.* (45 words)

b. *Everyone on the farm regarded Old Major (so they always called him, though the name under which Mr Jones had exhibited him was Willingdon Beauty) so highly that they were quite ready to lose an hour's sleep in order to hear what he had to say.* (46 words)

As any competent editor could see, [7b] is a clunky and ill-designed sentence. For one thing, the modifier *so highly* is separated by far too many words from the verb which it modifies (*regarded*). The active version is by no means a stylistic improvement over the active. And the wordcount actually goes up because there is no way to avoid the addition of three new subjects (*everyone*, *they*, and *Mr Jones*) if the active clauses are to be grammatical and intelligible. (Notice, *they* cannot be used as the subject of *had exhibited him*, because it would be taken to co-refer with *everyone* and *they*, which in context is the animals on Manor Farm, whereas it was the human farmer, Mr Jones, who had exhibited old Major under the name Willingdon Beauty.)

In this complex case, where there are three passive constructions inside one sentence, the word count goes up by one. In other cases it goes down by 1. But in aggregate Keefe found that the number of words saved comes out at zero.

In short, a little exploration of actual texts suggests that there is no foundation at all for the belief that you can make text noticeably more concise simply by changing all the passives to actives.

It may be good to "omit needless words," as William Strunk argued in *The Elements of Style* as long ago as 1918 (not that many writers have adhered to his maxim very closely); and for student writers, attempting to write more tersely may be good discipline. But virtuous as the enterprise of minimizing word count may be, eliminating passives will have almost no role to play in it. People keep repeating that passives will make your prose undesirably wordy; but repeating something doesn't make it true.