ACTIVE OR PASSIVE VOICE: DOES IT MATTER?

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the University of North Texas in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

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Denton, Texas
December, 1993

In this thesis, I report on the use of active and passive voice in the workplace and classroom through analysis of surveys completed by 37 employees and 66 students. The surveys offered six categories of business writing with ten sets of two sentences each, written in active and passive voice. Participants selected one sentence from each set and gave a reason for each selection. The participants preferred active over passive 47 to 46 percent of opportunities, but they preferred mixed voice over both, 49 percent. The participants preferred active only for memos to supervisors; in the other five categories they preferred passive or mixed voice. Both males and females preferred mixed voice, and age appeared to influence the choices. They cited context as the most common reason for using passive.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I address the use of active and passive voice in the workplace. I have questioned whether people in their workplaces use passive constructions; if so, I wanted to learn how and why to determine if college writing instructors need to spend more time instructing students in the judicious use of passive verbs. Additionally, I have reviewed the work of students to compare their use of passive voice with that of the workers.

The study revealed that employees do indeed find passive voice useful and that context and tone are strong factors in their choice of passive voice. The employees used passive voice predominantly in formal reports to supervisors and in instruction manuals. Students tended to use active more frequently than passive, but they also used mixed-voice sentences more frequently than did the employees.

To discover if employees and students differ in their choices of voice, I designed a survey that comprised six categories of writing. (See Appendix A, page 41, for the complete survey.) Each category contained ten sentences written in both active and passive voice. Three of the categories included writing that all general office
employees can expect to perform at some time, and three
contained more specialized types of communication which most
employees and consumers often confront. The categories are:

- Informal memorandum to your supervisor
- Formal report to your supervisor
- Informal memorandum to your peer
- Rejection letter
- General-information brochure for consumer
- Instruction manual

Before I distributed the survey to the participants, I asked five people currently in the work force to validate the survey; one of these people was also a student. I requested the people to suggest changes in format as well as in the text of the sentences. I changed the survey as seemed appropriate and then distributed it to 37 employees in six workplaces:

- First State Bank Denton
- Dallas District Office of the Mutual Of [sic] New York Life Insurance Company
- First United Methodist Church Denton
- A.L. Beevers Agency of State Farm Insurance, Denton
- New Horizons Counseling and Guidance Center, Enid, Oklahoma
- Office of Advancement at the University of North Texas.
I also distributed the survey to 66 students in three technical writing classes at the University of North Texas.

I asked all participants to select one of the sentences in each situation and to give a brief reason why they selected it. I also requested demographic information about the participants: their ages; their current jobs or majors, as applicable; and their gender.

Then I compiled the data from several perspectives, grouping the reasons for their choices into conventional grammatical attributes including context, tone, style and syntax. I looked at the employees' selections as a whole and by broad categories of jobs held. I looked at the students' selections as a whole and by majors. I looked briefly for trends in both groups of participants by age groups and gender.
Over the past twenty years, many educators and writers have researched the function of passive and active voice verbs. Much of the research has revolved around the comprehension question: are active-voice constructions easier to comprehend than passive ones? This research was something of a revolution for the scientific and technical world where the passive had been the voice of preference because of the objectivity the writer could maintain through its use.

Pursuing the answer to the comprehension question, R.P. and Veda R. Charrow found that in sentences where no agent is named, passive presents no difficulty (1325-26). Instead, they found that the verb's location in the sentence plays a significant role in making a passive construction harder to comprehend: "passive constructions, when properly used and not obscured in subordinate clauses, do not impede comprehension" (1326). Dan I. Slobin agreed with these experts and asserted that in sentences where no agent is named, "the passive form generally tended to be somewhat easier" to understand ("Grammatical" 226). The combined research of these and other writers and educators forced the promoters of "always passive" to accept the point that in fact active
voice could be not only "acceptable," but active could also capture the readers' attention and engage their participation in a way that passive could not. With this change of attitude, passive constructions became grammatical alerts that produced a backlash against passive; and the trend then moved past the circumspect use of passive to an aggressive avoidance. In preparation for the empirical research for this thesis, I read from both schools of thought: the case for the judicious use of passive and the case opposing its use.

The Case for the Use of Passive

Scholars have studied the passive-voice question in the areas of context, syntax, style, and tone.

Context. One of the major features is context, which is closely aligned with audience. Karen Scriven is a strong proponent for using passive voice based on context. She finds that "most texts also concede to passive if the agent or doer is unknown or unimportant" (91). Otto Jespersen recommends the passive when the agent is unknown or not easily stated, when the interest rests more in the passive subject than the active, or when the actor is self-evident from the context" (167). Likewise, D.R. Olson and N. Filby find that passive constructions are advantageous in sentences where the receiver is more important than the agent (362). John C. Hodges and Mary E. Whitten suggest
using passive "if the receiver of the action is more important than the doer" (330). Scriven also declares that passives allow writers to avoid "obstinate pronouns--they, one, you" (91) with which declaration Doris Whalen agrees and adds that passive is important for writing reports and minutes (qtd. in Dennis Baron, 9).

**Syntax.** Researchers and writers have also found that passive constructions facilitate more cohesive syntax. Joseph Williams, in his important work on clarity and grace, declares that "one important use of the passive is that it lets us switch a long subject full of new information for a short one that repeats something already mentioned or relatively more familiar" (38). Scriven agrees (92), and K. Scott Ferguson and Frank Parker in their 1990 work confirm that the use of the passive allows writers to follow the given/new contract (365). Bergen and Cornelia Evans support these opinions and recognize passive "as a sophisticated device popular among educated speakers and writers" (qtd. in Baron, 9). They reject the notion that passive is weak or clumsy: "When the agent is mentioned in a passive construction it has more emphasis than it would have with an active verb" (qtd. in Baron, 9).

**Style.** Scriven declares: "The passive has an important stylistic function in maintaining discourse topics in both oral and written communication . . . . [Among these are] frequent economy and the ability to create stylistic
focus and vary sentence emphasis . . ." (92). Williams maintains that passive voice exists largely "to rearrange a sentence to improve cohesion and emphasis" (39). James McCrimmon adds that "there are situations in which the passive voice is more emphatic" (156). Gordon H. Mills and John A. Walter concur and say that, properly used, the passive can produce "crisp and effective sentences" (qtd. in Baron, 9). Jane R. Walpole in her article "Why Must the Passive Be Damned?" declares: "Not only is the passive voice a significantly frequent option in modern prose, but it is also often the clearest and briefest way to convey information" (251). And Jespersen recommends the passive to "facilitate the connexion [sic] of one sentence with another" (168).

Tone. Tone is perhaps the most convincing reason for passive constructions; and with tone, we again consider audience. I. Klenbort and Moshe Anisfeld, as reported by Thomas L. Warren, point to tone as a very important need for passive voice: "The passive suggests special connotations in addition to the basic message" (280). John S. Fielden, Ronald E. Dalek, and Jean D. Fielden note that "the passive voice can be your best friend . . . because it provides an advantage to convey negative information to a supervisor or important customer," and Harry M. Brown recommends it to soften bad news (qtd. in Baron, 9). Jespersen suggests that writers use passive when they need to avoid mentioning the
actor because of "tact or delicacy of sentiment" (167). The handbook of the Delaware Technical and Community College reminds us of the diplomatic power available in passive constructions (Baron, 8), and Walker Gibson, in *Persona*, observes that the passive voice creates distance and dispassion, and expresses detachment (56), qualities often needed in business and professional communication. Likewise, Nancy Roundy "recommends the passive for its impersonal and objective function" (qtd. in Baron, 8).

Martin Cutts observes that "passives can . . . be very useful for defusing hostility and evading responsibility" (42). And James Raymond maintains that writers use the passive "when they want to evade or conceal the responsibility for someone's behavior" (qtd. in Baron, 8). These qualities, while they may sound negative, are often helpful in the workplace.

John Zhang has advanced a compelling case for using the passive voice based on his study of the characteristic of indirectness in business and professional writing. Zhang's research did not focus on voice directly, but his findings definitely relate to voice. He found that there is indeed a "relationship between usage and politeness phenomena in professional letter writing . . . . The more polite the addressee feels the request is, the more indirect the request will be . . . ." (292). The addressee and the writer cooperate to "save each other's face" (292). He refers to
work by Kathryn Riley which points out specifically that passive constructions create distance and formality and, therefore, serve a vital function as writers strive to reduce "face-threatening" communications (14). Riley includes three uses of passive constructions in her nine strategies to achieve indirectness in professional letter writing. The three are: (1) "Impersonalize . . .". (2) "State the requested act as a general rule . . .". (3) "Nominalize . . .". (14). Brown and Levinson concur (69).

These then are some of the proponents of and their reasons for using passive voice constructions. However, there are disadvantages as well.

The Case Against the Use of Passive

Of the several features that contribute to the negative image of passive sentences, comprehension is the one most cited. Richard David Ramsey, reporting on a survey from Leeds, England, explains that "third-person passive voice, so commonly the style of twentieth-century technical English, is disadvantageous from a communication standpoint" (109). His study provided results from 300 students and indicated that the students "appreciated" third-person passive least and retained identity information least when that information was presented in third-person passive. First-person passive enabled readers to remember more about the author, but it increased reading time because an agent
is generally unimportant in such writing (109-110). G.R. Klare confirmed that passive causes more difficult recall (3).

Much of Scriven's research reveals that passive constructions do tend to lengthen sentences (89). And Williams has found that passive verbs create "that wretched prose we call medicalese, sociologese, educationese, bureaucratese—all of the 'eses of those who confuse authority and objectivity with polysyllabic abstraction and remote impersonality" (21). This 'ese prose frequently involves the excessive use of esoteric terms and inevitably such prose manifests itself in very long, convoluted sentences. Scriven also concedes the point that passive constructions are likely to entrap writers to use empty verbs and dependent clauses which result in sentences aptly described as "weak" or "dead" (90).
CHAPTER III

THE SURVEY INSTRUMENT

As I designed the survey instrument for my research, I considered three categories of business and professional writing that most people who work within a communal environment can expect to perform. These categories, as identified in the survey, are:

- Informal memorandums to your supervisor
- Formal reports to your supervisor
- Informal memorandums to peers or co-workers

For each of these categories, I devised 10 situations and supplied for each a set of two sentences, each sentence in a different voice from that of its companion.

I considered three other categories of writing that are often received by people in the workplace and by consumers:

- Letters of rejection
- General-information brochures for the consumer
- Instruction manuals

For these categories, I supplied only dual sentences without specific situations, because the categories themselves were sufficiently descriptive. The types of sentences that comprise this survey are listed in Table 1.
Table 1
Types of Sentences Contained in the Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Sentences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simple sentence, active voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple sentence, passive voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compound sentence, both clauses active voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compound sentence, one clause active and one passive voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compound sentence, both clauses passive voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex sentence, both clauses active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex sentence, independent clause active, dependent clause passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex sentence, independent clause passive, dependent clause active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex sentence, both clauses passive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total active choices comprise sentence codes 1, 3 and 6; total passive, 2, 5 and 9. Codes 4, 7 and 8 are sentences that I label as mixed because they combine active and passive voice. The complete survey instrument is included with this thesis as Appendix A.

I considered offering specific reasons from which the participants could choose when explaining their voice choices; such a format would have been easier to analyze.
However, I decided that such a format would appear to lead the participants, so I left the reasons open ended. In my review of the literature, I had found traditional grammar attributes repeatedly used as reasons why passive voice would be more appropriate in sentences. Although many of the reasons that the participants gave defied such a grouping, I was able to group most of them accordingly. The attributes, which I describe in greater detail in Chapter IV, include context, tone, style, and syntax.

By analyzing the voice and reason responses to these sentences, I expected to learn answers to the following questions:

- Do employees in the workplace use passive voice to a significant degree?
- Do students in the classroom use passive voice in the same ways as the employees?
- Does either or both group use passive under certain circumstances because of certain relationships?
- Does either or both group use passive in certain mediums of communication?
- Are employees and/or students more likely to use passive in a particular sentence structure?
CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF THE SURVEY

From the 103 surveys returned to me, I extracted initially by voice and reason the responses that the participants gave; within those two areas, I reviewed both collectively and separately the choices of employees and students. I identified the voice choices according to the nine types of sentences contained in the survey (see Table 1, page 12 for the types). Then I combined those nine types into three main voice groups: active, passive, and mixed voice. I calculated the ratio of a specific choice to the total number of possibilities of that choice within the number of answers to a given question.

Example: In the category of the instruction manual, the survey offered ten opportunities to choose a sentence written in passive voice; therefore, if all 103 participants completed that part of the survey, there would be 1,030 possibilities for choosing the passive voice. However, only 911 choices were given, and of that number 519 of them were passive voice. The ratio of the choice of the passive voice was 57%.

All the percentages of opportunities that I cite in the following section of Voice Responses reflect ratios derived in the above manner.
I also cite statistics relating to the null hypothesis "that asserts that there is no true difference between two population means" (Henry Garrett, p. 213). The statistic is the variance ratio, called the F, that is derived from testing the null hypothesis (Garrett, p. 284). I use both the .01 and the .05 levels of significance, with the .01 being the most exacting. My specific findings about voice responses follow.

A. Voice Responses

Figure 1, page 16, displays the percentages by which all participants chose active, passive, and mixed-voice sentences. The percentages indicate a surprisingly close distribution overall, with the participants preferring mixed-voice sentences a slight 2% over active and 3% over passive.

Figure 2, page 17, displays some of the contradictions I discovered as I considered sentence types. For example, in voice choices from all participants by sentence types, the participants chose the simple sentence written in active voice (simple/A) 52% of the opportunities available in the total number of answers. That is, the survey contained 37 simple/A sentences, thereby offering 3,811 opportunities for the whole population of 103 participants to choose a simple/A sentence. They did so 1,968 times; therefore, they selected simple/A 52% of the opportunities. The
Figure 1. Voice choices of all participants.
Figure 2. Voice choices of all participants by sentence types.
seeming contradiction lies in the fact that the participants exhibited a marked inclination to choose a compound sentence with both clauses written in passive voice when such a choice was available—219 of the 309 possibilities. One sentence chosen by 90 versus 11 people was the following sentence from informal memorandums to peers or co-workers with the situation, "You want to soften your criticism."

The board meeting was well organized and moved quickly, but the evening session was not so well handled.

The second choice was:

You organized the board meeting well so that it moved quickly, but you did not handle the evening session so well.

An interesting note is that the least popular sentence type was the compound sentence with both clauses written in active voice— theoretically the exact opposite of the favored type. I next looked at the participants' responses according to the categories.

1. Overall Voice Responses by Writing Categories. The category appears to affect significantly the voice responses over all the participants (see Figure 3, page 19). The clear trend to active for informal memorandums to supervisors is at one end of the spectrum—62%—while the instruction manual shows a
Figure 3. Voice choices of all participants by writing categories.
57% use of the passive at the other. The very strong inclination to use mixed voice in memos to peers and in rejection letters reflects very definite sensitivity to the situation. The sentences cited above are from memos to peers; a sample of two sentences from rejection letters are:

- Your article is well written, but it does not follow the storyline we agreed upon.
- You wrote a good article, but you did not follow the storyline we agreed upon.

2. Voice Responses of Employees Only. Table 2 lists the seven job types of the 37 employees that participated in the research; the numbers indicate the number of participants within each type.

Table 2
The Number of Employee Participants by Job Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Relations</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundraising</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General office staff</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I do not infer a valid preference in some of the job types because of the small numbers in the groups; however, it is safe to consider the general office staff preference for mixed voice and the management preference for active as valid indicators since there were 17 and eight participants in the job types, respectively. (See Figure 4, page 22, for percentages of voice choices by job types.)

The choices of all the employees exhibited a high F statistic when described by writing categories. Both active and passive choices figured mathematically at .000% for the null hypothesis, which indicates that there is virtually no possibility of being wrong if we infer that a distinct relationship exists between persons in certain jobs and the voice they choose. The mixed-voice choices also are highly significant at .004%. (See Figure 5, page 23, for the complete percentages by writing categories.)

As shown in Figure 5, the highest statistical point for employees within writing categories indicates that the employees chose passive voice for instruction manuals at a 75% rate; they chose mixed-voice sentences for memos to their peers, 68%; and they chose 60% active for informal memos to their supervisors and 60% passive for formal reports to the same persona.
Figure 4. Voice choices of employees by job types.
Figure 5. Voice choices of employees by writing categories.

Legend
Active
Passive
Mixed
3. **Voice Responses by Students Only.** All 66 students who participated in the survey were in technical writing classes; the breakdown by majors appears in Table 3.

Table 3

The Number of Student Participants by Majors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Computer Science</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General liberal arts</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate undeclared</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6, page 25, details the complete breakdown of voice choices among students by majors. No significant relationship can be inferred between journalism, undeclared, or general liberal arts majors and their voice choices. However, a very strong preference exists in the choice of mixed voice from computer science and English students.

The students expressed their strongest preference for active (63%) in the category of memos to supervisors (see Figure 7, page 26). But
Figure 6. Voice choices of students by majors.

Legend

- Active
- Passive
- Mixed
Figure 7. Voice choices of students by writing categories.

Legend
- Active
- Passive
- Mixed
their 57% preference for mixed-voice sentences in the category of rejection letters presents an interesting inconsistency. It should be noted that students did not answer approximately 285 questions in the last two categories of the survey, those of the consumer brochure and instruction manuals. However, I remind the reader that the statistics that I cite in this analysis are drawn from answers only, not from the total number of questions.

The F statistic, at .000%, again indicates that the writing category plays a significant role in the students' choices of active and passive constructions; the categories also impact mixed-voice choices but at the less significant percentage of .049%.

4. **Comparison of Responses by Category/Employees and Students.** As Figure 8, page 28, reveals, significant differences appear between employee and student choices of active and passive voice although their mixed-voice statistics are identical.

Figure 9, page 29, displays active and passive voice comparisons between employee and student choices by writing categories. The closest similarity among the categories appears in the informal memos to supervisors where employees selected active voice 60% to the students' 63%, and passive
Figure 8. Voice choice comparison of employees and students.
Figure 9. Active and passive voice comparisons of employees and students by writing categories.

Legend

Employee active
Student active
Employee passive
Student passive
40% to 36%, respectively. The greatest disparity appears in the category of instruction manuals where employees chose passive by an overwhelming 75% to students' 37%.

Figures 10, 11, and 12 compare the two groups in categories where mixed-voice sentences were available. Figure 10, page 31, indicates the second closest similarity, which is in the formal report to supervisor where as few as three percentage points separate the two groups in the choice of mixed-voice sentences. However, the students chose active sentences nine percentage points more than did the employees. The employees, on the other hand, chose passive sentences ten percentage points more than did the students.

Figure 11, page 32, illustrates the choices for memorandums to peer. The closest point in this category is in the use of passive constructions but that point still reveals a 10-percentage-point differential, with the employees leaning more heavily than the students toward passive. Employees exhibit further preference for mixed voice while students overall prefer active.

Figure 12, page 33, reveals the continuing differences between employees and students, yet indicates that both prefer mixed voice.
Figure 10. Active, passive and mixed voice comparisons of employees and students in report to supervisor.

Legend

Employee active
Employee passive
Employee mixed
Student active
Student passive
Student mixed
Figure 11. Active, passive and mixed voice comparisons of employees and students in memo to peer.

Legend

Employee active
Employee passive
Employee mixed
Student active
Student passive
Student mixed
Figure 12. Active, passive and mixed voice comparisons of employees and students in rejection letter.

Legend

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Employee active</th>
<th>Student active</th>
<th>Employee passive</th>
<th>Student passive</th>
<th>Employee mixed</th>
<th>Student mixed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Hatched Pattern]</td>
<td>[Dashed Pattern]</td>
<td>[Hatched Pattern]</td>
<td>[Dashed Pattern]</td>
<td>[Transparent Pattern]</td>
<td>[Black Pattern]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I point out again that although the last two categories—rejection letters and instruction manuals—were not answered by some of the students (about 285 questions in all), the reported percentages are derived from answers only.

B. **Reason Responses**

The participants gave reasons for 2,419 of their active-voice choices and 1,855 of their passive-voice choices. I figured the percentages according to the ratio of a single reason to the total number of reasons given for active- and for passive-voice choices. Examples: Among the 1,855 reasons that the participants gave for choosing passive voice, they gave "context" as their reason in 1,126 instances. Therefore, context was the reason 60.7% of the time, rounded off in the table to 61%. Of the 2,419 active-voice reasons, the participants gave "context" as their reason only 25 times; therefore, the percentage is only 1%.

To analyze the reasons that the participants gave for their voice choices, I grouped their comments according to the main grammar attributes I encountered in my research of the literature. Those attributes and the comments associated with those attributes were as follows:

- **Context**: The receiver is important; the agent
is not easily stated; passive avoids obstinate pronoun; the actor is self-evident.

- **Tone:** The sentence sounds tactful; it is indirect; it defuses hostility; it sounds impersonal.

- **Style:** The voice helps provide focus and emphasis; it is clear, brief, accessible.

- **Syntax:** The order is prioritized; the agent is first; it enables the given/new contract.

Other reasons which participants gave for their choices include the following:

- The sentence seems more appropriate.
- It sounds better.
- The other sentence is bad grammar.
- The other sentence is passive voice.

Overall, the participants cited context most frequently as their reason for choosing passive while they indicated that the importance of the agent was the primary reason for choosing active voice. Table 4 indicates the percentages for reasons given for active- and passive-voice preferences.
Table 4
Reasons for Preferences of Active and Passive Voice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Active</th>
<th>Passive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agent important</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other bad grammar</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other passive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive</td>
<td></td>
<td>.001%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syntax</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sound</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tone</td>
<td>7%</td>
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CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

I did find answers to the questions I asked at the beginning of this study.

♦ Do employees in the workplace use passive voice to a significant degree?
Yes, employees active in the workplace frequently see a need to use passive voice sentences in their professional writing (see Figure 4, page 22). Of the seven job types represented by the participants, six of them used passive constructions more frequently than they used active. The dissenting group was management, who preferred both active and mixed sentences to passive.

♦ Do students in the classroom use passive voice in the same ways as the employees?
Students' use of passive does not correlate with that of employees (see Figure 8, page 28). (I remind the reader that all the students were in technical writing classes where instructors stress active-voice constructions.) Overall, the students tended toward active voice; however, they did use mixed-voice sentences to the same degree as did
employees, and computer science and English students used mixed sentences very heavily (see Figure 6, page 25). Yet the students preferred mixed voice for consumer brochures and instruction manuals; employees chose passive for both categories by 20 and 53 percentage points, respectively (see Figure 9, page 29). In reports to supervisor, the students held to passive by one percentage point, and, again, the employees preferred passive over active by 20 percentage points and over mixed voice by 8 points. In both memos to peer and rejection letters, the closest point between employees and students was in the preference of both for mixed voice in the rejection letters, where the difference is six percentage points.

Does either or both use passive under certain circumstances, because of certain relationships?
The answer appears to be no because the employees and students very definitely preferred active voice in the informal memos to supervisor (see Figure 10, page 31). Yet in formal reports to the same persona, employees made a strong move to passive followed by a noticeable tendency to mixed voice. They rejected active voice by 12 to 20 percentage points (see Figure 10).
Does either or both use passive in certain mediums of communication?
The medium does appear to influence the voice heavily but not necessarily to passive. In addition to the formal reports, both employee and student groups chose mixed-voice sentences decidedly for memos to peers and for rejection letters (see Figures 11, page 32, and 12, page 33).

Is either group more likely to use passive in a particular sentence structure?
The answer to this question is unclear. Overall, participants selected a compound sentence with both clauses passive 71% of the opportunities in the questions answered. (They selected the counterpart—compound with both clauses active—only 32% of the opportunities.) They selected a complex sentence with an active independent clause and a passive dependent clause 59% of the answer opportunities, but they chose a complex sentence with passive independent and active dependent clauses only 39% of the opportunities. Considering the variances that the participants displayed, I cannot establish a distinct preference.

This study, while not designed with strict statistical parameters, does indicate that both groups—employees and students—find situations which motivate them to use passive
voice, most frequently because of the context and secondly because of the tone they want to convey. Both groups also select mixed-voice sentences often. However, I did not evaluate any of the choices for accuracy, appropriateness, or quality of sentence chosen; therefore, I leave room for a margin of error. The distinction of each environment—the workplace and the classroom—influences both choices: The workplace invariably informs communications because of employee hierarchy and politics just as the classroom informs students' choices because of the attention to curriculum topic and goal. Still, the responses seem to suggest that students very likely should be alert for situations which might recommend passive constructions for tone and context. Similarly, people already in the workplace should probably venture to use active voice more frequently to achieve clearer and more vigorous communications. A further study that would more tightly control the population, ensure their responses, and offer a more equal selection of sentence types would be necessary to determine implications for the classroom.
APPENDIX A

SURVEY
PART I
INSTRUCTIONS

1. Please fill in the following blanks.

   Age ______
   If you're a student, your major ______________________
   If you're a fulltime employee, your type of work ________
   Sex ________

2. Then read the category and situation for each of the following groups of sentences. The category identifies the audience to whom the sentence is addressed; the situation explains the circumstances in which the sentence is written.

3. Circle the letter for the sentence which seems to fit the category and situation best.

4. Then please explain briefly the reason for each choice. Reasons for your choices might include--but are not limited to--the following:

   ** It doesn't matter who is doing the action;
   ** You don't want to come on too strong;
   ** I want to elicit, not command, cooperation;
   ** The other sentence sounds awkward;
   ** I need to emphasize the identity of the person doing the action;
   ** <The leader or the project, etc.> is the most important part of the sentence.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *
1. **Situation:** You are concerned about the problem.

   (a) We must address this problem.
   (b) This problem must be addressed.

   Reason for choice: 

2. **Situation:** The memo is to urge action.

   (a) Someone in our office should attend this meeting.
   (b) This meeting should be attended by someone in our office.

   Reason for choice: 

3. **Situation:** The letter referred to is a good letter.

   (a) Sue wrote this letter for you to sign.
   (b) This letter for you to sign was written by Sue.

   Reason for choice: 

4. **Situation:** The signature is important.

   (a) I have finished the letter for you to sign.
   (b) The letter for you to sign has been finished.

   Reason for choice: 

5. **Situation:** You are calling your supervisor’s attention to the summary.

   (a) I have attached a summary of the project.
   (b) A summary of the project is attached.

   Reason for choice: 
6. **Situation:** The information reports progress on your agenda.
   
   (a) I have completed the filing.
   
   (b) The filing has been completed by me.
   
   Reason for choice: 

7. **Situation:** Identifying the coordinator is vital.
   
   (a) Jim has coordinated all our efforts.
   
   (b) All our efforts have been coordinated by Jim.
   
   Reason for choice: 

8. **Situation:** Who mailed the package is unimportant.
   
   (a) I mailed the packages yesterday afternoon.
   
   (b) The packages were mailed by me yesterday afternoon.
   
   Reason for choice: 

9. **Situation:** The minutes are the focus of the information.
   
   (a) Mary distributed the minutes of the meeting for us.
   
   (b) The minutes of the meeting were distributed for us by Mary.
   
   Reason for choice: 

10. **Situation:** Your supervisor has asked about the minutes.
    
    (a) I distributed the minutes of the meeting.
    
    (b) The minutes of the meeting have been distributed.
    
    Reason for choice: 
CATEGOR Y B: From formal reports to your supervisor

1. **Situation:** You are writing a progress report on a special project.
   
   (a) The project should be completed by June 1.
   
   (b) We should complete the project by June 1.
   
   **Reason for choice:**

2. **Situation:** You want to emphasize the joint participation.
   
   (a) The proposal to reorganize the records department is submitted by the assistant director and me.
   
   (b) The assistant director and I propose to reorganize the records department.
   
   **Reason for choice:**

3. **Situation:** The last mailing is of primary interest.
   
   (a) By starting the directory project this summer, we should complete the last mailing by September 1993.
   
   (b) By starting the directory project this summer, the last mailing should be completed by September 1993.
   
   **Reason for choice:**

4. **Situation:** The requirement comes from the matching-gift companies.
   
   (a) The matching-gift companies require us to return their gifts if the donors' checks are not honored by the banks.
   
   (b) We are required by the matching-gift companies to return their gifts if the donors' checks are not honored by the banks.
   
   **Reason for choice:**
5. **Situation:** The unanimity of the responses is significant.

(a) I called each of the four companies and received the same response from each.

(b) Each of the four companies was called, and the same response was received from each.

Reason for choice: 

6. **Situation:** You want to emphasize the importance of outside support.

(a) The first step is to enlist the help of agents who work in the selected companies.

(b) The help of agents who work in the selected companies should be enlisted as the first step.

Reason for choice: 

7. **Situation:** The campaign schedule is the important factor.

(a) We cannot interrupt our campaign schedule without serious results.

(b) Our campaign schedule cannot be interrupted without serious results.

Reason for choice: 

8. **Situation:** You want to be careful not to appear to place fault.

(a) If someone interrupts our campaign schedule with this new project, the results will be serious.

(b) If our campaign schedule is interrupted with this new project, the results will be serious.

Reason for choice: 

9. **Situation:** Your supervisor’s niece prepared the nomination, and it was not done well.

(a) The nomination was poorly prepared; therefore, it was not seriously considered.

(b) Miss Marple did not prepare the nomination well; therefore, the committee did not seriously consider it.

Reason for choice: ______________________________________________________________________

10. **Situation:** You want to make it clear that Dr. Meadows failed in his record-keeping.

(a) Because Dr. Meadows kept only scant records, I am unable to compile an accurate and timely report.

(b) Because only scant records were kept, an accurate and timely report will be impossible to compile.

Reason for choice: ______________________________________________________________________

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**CATEGORY C: From informal memos to peers or co-workers**

1. **Situation:** The joint work of the staff and you is important.

(a) My staff and I should complete this project by Thursday.

(b) This project should be completed by my staff and me by Thursday.

Reason for choice: ______________________________________________________________________

2. **Situation:** You want to emphasize that your part is finished.

(a) I have finished my part of the project; now it’s your turn.

(b) My part of the project has been finished; now it’s your turn.

Reason for choice: ______________________________________________________________________
3. **Situation:** You want to emphasize your co-worker's input.

(a) I need your input right away.

(b) Your input is needed right away.

Reason for choice: 

4. **Situation:** The action has not occurred.

(a) The committee has not yet been notified, since you sent this memo only yesterday.

(b) We have not yet notified the committee, since you sent this memo only yesterday.

Reason for choice: 

5. **Situation:** Identifying the person who is acting is important.

(a) Our trip to the research conference has been cancelled by the vice president.

(b) The vice president cancelled our trip to the research conference.

Reason for choice: 

6. **Situation:** You want to soften your criticism.

(a) The board meeting was well organized and moved quickly, but the evening session was not so well handled.

(b) You organized the board meeting well so that it moved quickly, but you did not handle the evening session so well.

Reason for choice: 

7. **Situation:** You want to stress the importance of your role in planning sessions.

(a) When you establish another gift club, I should be included in the planning.

(b) When you establish another gift club, you should include me in the planning.

Reason for choice: 

8. **Situation:** The responsibility for the failure is the focus.

(a) All of us must share the responsibility for the failure of this project.

(b) Responsibility for the failure of this project must be shared by all of us.

Reason for choice: ________________________________

9. **Situation:** You want to emphasize the origin of the warning.

(a) We have been warned by the director to avoid issuing unsolicited proposals.

(b) The director warned us to avoid issuing unsolicited proposals.

Reason for choice: ________________________________

10. **Situation:** The warning is the focus.

(a) A warning was issued by the director that we should not send unsolicited proposals.

(b) The director warned us not to send unsolicited proposals.

Reason for choice: ________________________________
The next categories of sentences deal with particular types of documents but with no defined audiences. As in Part I, the category is identified at the beginning of each group of sentences.

1. Please read the category.
2. Circle the letter for the sentence which seems to fit the category best.
3. Then please explain the reason for each choice.

** ** * ** ** * ** ** * * * ** *

### CATEGORY D: From letters of rejection

1. (a) Your answers have been reevaluated to determine their validity.
   (b) We reevaluated your answers to determine their validity.

   Reason for choice: ________________________________________

2. (a) These sentences are written in a style that children would not understand.
   (b) You have written these sentences in a style that children would not understand.

   Reason for choice: ________________________________________
3. (a) Another candidate has been selected for this study because of her previous experience with the industry.
(b) We have selected another candidate for this study because of her previous experience with the industry.

Reason for choice: 

4. (a) Your portfolio was considered impressive in several areas, but it exhibited only minimal experience in charitable fundraising.
(b) We considered your portfolio impressive in several areas, but we found only minimal experience in charitable fundraising.

Reason for choice: 

5. (a) Because we discovered three unpaid obligations, your application for credit cannot be approved.
(b) Because three unpaid obligations were discovered, your application for credit cannot be approved.

Reason for choice: 

6. (a) We appreciate your offer to give us the camera although we are unable to accept it under the arrangement you propose.
(b) Your offer to give us the camera is appreciated although it cannot be accepted under the arrangement you propose.

Reason for choice: 

7. (a) Although the proposal submitted by your firm has been reviewed, it cannot be accepted.
(b) Although we reviewed the proposal submitted by your firm, we cannot accept it.

Reason for choice: 

8. (a) Your article is well written, but it does not follow the storyline we agreed upon.
(b) You wrote a good article, but you did not follow the storyline we agreed upon.

Reason for choice: 

9. (a) Your painting was not received in time to qualify for the juried show.

(b) We did not receive your painting in time to qualify for the juried show.

Reason for choice: ________________________________

10. (a) Because we discovered three unpaid obligations, we are unable to approve your application for credit.

(b) Because three unpaid obligations were discovered, we are unable to approve your application for credit.

Reason for choice: ________________________________

CATEGORY E: From general-information brochure supplied to the consumer

1. (a) For years federal regulations have been ignored to the degree that grain crops have been lost to drought.

(b) For years farmers have ignored federal regulations to the degree that drought has destroyed grain crops.

Reason for choice: ________________________________

2. (a) When pesticides have been used routinely, fruits have been damaged and rendered inedible.

(b) When farmers have used pesticides routinely, they have damaged fruits and rendered the fruits inedible.

Reason for choice: ________________________________

3. (a) The index was undoubtedly inflated by the addition of three correlating factors.

(b) The addition of three correlating factors undoubtedly inflated the index.

Reason for choice: ________________________________
4. (a) The new measure was based in part on the Bradford findings.
(b) The panel based the new measure in part on the Bradford findings.

Reason for choice: 

5. (a) The research studies have been so limited in scope that they have been of dubious value.
(b) The department has so limited the scope of these research studies that they are of dubious value.

Reason for choice: 

6. (a) Pastel hues have been favored for many years by southwestern homeowners.
(b) For many years southwestern homeowners have favored pastel hues.

Reason for choice: 

7. (a) We designed the software with the unskilled end-user in mind.
(b) The software was designed with the unskilled end-user in mind.

Reason for choice: 

8. (a) The eyeball is filled with a jelly-like substance called the vitreous body.
(b) A jelly-like substance called the vitreous body fills the eyeball.

Reason for choice: 

9. (a) Resistance exercises can help bolster and protect joints from further harm.
(b) Joints can be bolstered and protected from further harm by resistance exercises.

Reason for choice: 
10. (a) A list of dietary top priorities was then created by compiling the nutritionists' responses.
(b) We then compiled the nutritionists' responses to create a list of dietary top priorities.
Reason for choice: 

**CATEGORY F: From instruction manuals**

1. (a) Building piles and discard piles are developed through play.
(b) You develop building piles and discard piles through play.
Reason for choice: 

2. (a) With five or more players, you deal 20 cards.
(b) With five or more players, 20 cards are dealt.
Reason for choice: 

3. (a) Telephone calling cards need not be listed.
(b) You need not list telephone calling cards.
Reason for choice: 

4. (a) The eggs should be well beaten before they are added to the batter.
(b) You should beat the eggs well before you add them to the batter.
Reason for choice: 

5. (a) The "off" switch should be firmly disengaged before the machine is moved.
(b) You should disengage the "off" switch firmly before you move the machine.
Reason for choice: 

6. (a) All the checks must be endorsed before they are deposited.
(b) You should endorse all the checks before you deposit them.
Reason for choice: 

7. (a) You should wash, dry, and iron the fabric carefully.
(b) The fabric should be washed, dried, and ironed carefully.
Reason for choice: 

8. (a) The solvent should not be mixed with another cleaning agent.
(b) You should not mix the solvent with another cleaning agent.
Reason for choice: 

9. (a) Great care should be taken to distribute the fertilizer evenly.
(b) You should take great care to distribute the fertilizer evenly.
Reason for choice: 

10. (a) When the display is dismantled, the right side should be loosened first.
(b) When you dismantle the display, loosen the right side first.
Reason for choice: 

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

Please check one of the answers to the following question:

The back-to-back format of this questionnaire was satisfactory.

Yes ___  No ___
APPENDIX B

VOICE CHOICES BY GENDER AND BY AGE
Figure 13. Voice choices by gender.

Legend
Female
Male
Figure 14. Voice choices by age.
REFERENCES


Garrett, Henry E. Statistics in Psychology and Education.


Walpole, Jane R. "Why Must the Passive Be Damned?" College Composition and Communication 30.3 (1979) 251-254.


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