

Active vs. Passive

By Azalea Dabill

Andre Norton does active voice well in *Shadow Hawk*.

. . . The Kush were like ants, wearily decided Rahotep, the young captain of Scouts, who stood on a hillock that raised the chieftain's hut above its fellows. You could plant your sandal forcibly on a hill, or even go so far as to dig up the tunneled earth beneath, getting bitten in the process. But within a day or two another city would spring into being in its place.

A curl of smoke wreathed his head, and he coughed. But he did not retreat from his post. He knew—as did every one of the outwardly unconcerned archers under his command—that there were hostile eyes watching—with hate and, he hoped, a little wholesome fear.

The passive voice takes a skilled writer to use it in the right place; there, it is an indispensable boon. Used wrongly, passive voice will drive your reader to distraction. Passive voice happens when the object of an action becomes the subject of a sentence.

Ex. 1 The rug was swept by Dilly.

“The rug” is the object of the action “swept,” and “the rug” is also the subject.

Using passives sparingly can add pleasing rhythm variation. They also play the vital role of downplaying the doer of the action in a sentence. If you want to keep the doer from the reader's notice, or to hide a doer subtly, say, for the sake of mystery, use the passive. If you are not sure if your sentence works better in the passive or the active form, write it both ways and compare.

Ex. 1 Passive voice: The jewels were stolen. Or, The jewels were stolen by a thief.

Ex. 2 Active voice: A thief stole the jewels. Or, Ariana stole the jewels.

Practice putting this active sentence into the passive.

Ex. 3 Landon wielded the sword.

And put this passive into active.

Ex. 4 The crumbling castle wall was climbed by Desiree.

June Casagrande says in, *It was the best of sentences, it was the worst of sentences*[,]

“Sometimes passives are the greatest thing in the world: ‘Professor Persimmon is considered a leading economic expert.’”

Answers: The sword was wielded by Landon. Desiree climbed the crumbling castle wall.

In this flyer where I use block quotes (if applicable), I have changed to single-spacing for readability.