

What If?

GRAPPLING WITH GRAMMAR

An Active Verb is a Fit Verb

A beginning writer will often make the mistake of using the passive form of a verb rather than the active form. Perhaps a lack of confidence leads to a wishy-washy writing style. Don't let that happen to you; exercise your active verbs.



The active form gives more strength to your writing. It shows that something is happening rather than something having been done. Check out these examples.

Allan painted the barn.

The barn was painted by Allan.

In the first sentence Allan is the subject of the sentence and he did the action of painting. In the second sentence the barn becomes the subject and your character (Allan) has faded to the end of the sentence. Here is another example of active as opposed to passive.

John plugged his ears when his sister screamed.

When his sister was screaming John was plugging his ears.

I think you will agree that the second sentence written in the passive form is not only weaker but also poor writing. I would never write a sentence like that you say? But you might write one like this.

The floor was washed by Louise.

There's nothing really wrong with the sentence but poor Louise did all that work and we don't get a firm picture of that.

Louise washed the floor.

Two fewer words make your writing tighter and let your reader clearly visualize Louise hard at work. That's what you want; strong characters that are creating the action in your story rather than having the action happen to them. Here is an example of having your character take action rather than be acted upon.

The space ship had been piloted safely through the asteroid belt by Captain Franz.

It sounds like quite the accomplishment but who is in charge here. Poor old Captain Franz kept his passengers and crew safe but we don't hear about him until the end. Let's try again.

Captain Franz piloted his space ship safely through the asteroid belt.

Can you feel the relief of the people on the ship? Can't you tell how grateful they are to Captain Franz? The second sentence definitely gives you the urge to stand up and cheer.

In some cases your character can actually disappear through the use of the passive verb form.

Children could be heard screaming in the distance. The horse needed to be urged into a gallop.

Hang on just a minute here. Who is hearing the children scream and urging the horse over the hill? What happened to the hero of the story?

Sarah heard children screaming in the distance. She urged the horse into a gallop.

Sarah is back and she's on her way to a dramatic rescue. Don't let your characters fade into the background. Keep your verbs active and your characters will be too.