The Active Voice: One Key to More Effective Geographic Writing

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ABSTRACT

Despite admonitions from grammarians, journal editors, and conference program chairs, many geographers apparently either know not or care not about the advantages of choosing the forceful active voice over the feeble, often anonymous, passive voice. Paired examples of (1) previously published sentences, from geographic sources, containing at least one passive expression and (2) my revisions of the same sentences provide herein illustrative material for authors wishing to activate their prose.

KEY WORDS: active voice, passive voice, geographic writing, abstract, writing style.

M. Duane Nellis strikes me as overly optimistic. In his invitation to geographers who might wish to present papers at the August 1992 meeting of the Commission on Changing Rural Systems, Nellis wrote, "The abstract and presentation should use the active voice rather than the passive to transmit research results clearly and concisely" (Nellis, 1991, p. 10). Program chairs and editors have been admonishing geographers to eschew the passive voice in favor of the active for years with, at best, only modest success. I suspect that of the abstracts Nellis received for his 1992 conference less than 20 percent were devoid of the passive voice and that virtually none of his program participants finished their presentations without succumbing to the soothing sound of the passive.

I, too, once trod the passive path as blithely as the next geographer. Looking back at almost anything I wrote in the years before my conversion makes me wonder how I could have missed such a simple key to better prose. Instead of using the active voice to say, "Frankie shot Johnny," I probably would have gone the passive route, saying, "Johnny was shot by Frankie." That conversion into an active-voice advocate came unexpectedly during the fall of 1987, while I was teaching a course for the United States Army Reserve. Among my duties was a block of instruction dealing with
soldierly writing, and part of the Army's strategy was (and is) to discourage the passive voice in correspondence and other written military communication. Soldiers, the lesson stressed, ought to take responsibility for their decisions and recommendations. Geographers should do likewise.

I believe, however, that most geographers are either ignorant of the power of the active voice, or they are unwilling to write in a manner that forces them to attribute responsibility for the actions they discuss. This essay (1) cites a variety of grammarians who advocate the active voice; (2) provides evidence of the pervasive pattern of the passive voice in geographic prose; and (3) offers assistance to those who wish to recognize the passive and, by activating their prose, become more effective writers.

THE GRAMMARIANS SPEAK

Journal editors, program chairs, and the rest of us in the discipline will find no shortage of active-voice proponents among grammarians. True, these authorities will typically concede (with what appears to be reluctance) the fact that the passive voice has its occasional place; but never have I found such an authority speaking primarily for the passive.

"Shun the Passive," wrote rhetorician Sheridan Baker (1985, p. 120):

The passive voice is more wordy and deadly than most people imagine, or it would not be so persistent . . . The passive voice puts the cart before the horse: the object of the action first, then the harnessing verb, running backwards, then the driver forgotten, and the whole contraption at a standstill.

Baker knew why we find breaking this habit difficult (p. 121):

Our massed, scientific, and bureaucratic society is so addicted to [the passive voice] that you must constantly alert yourself to its drowsy, impersonal pomp. The simple English sentence is active; it moves from subject through verb to object . . . . Committees always write this way [passive voice], and the effect on academic writing, . . . is astounding. "It was moved that a meeting would be held," the secretary writes, to avoid pinning the rap on anybody. So writes the professor, so writes the student.

He concluded, "The best way to prune [excess words] is with the active voice, cutting the passive and its fungus as you go" (Baker, 1985, p. 121).

"Use the Active Voice" constitutes item fourteen among William Strunk and E. B. White's "Principles of Composition" in their classic, The Elements of Style (1979). "The habitual use of the active voice . . ." they wrote, "makes for forcible writing. This is true not only in narrative concerned principally with action but in writing of any kind." I include geographical writing among those genres that writers can make "lively and emphatic by substituting a transitive [verb] in the active voice for such perfunctory expressions as . . . could be heard" (p. 18). Besides, the active voice usually requires fewer words than the passive so "brevity is a by-product of vigor" (p. 19).

Handbooks for writers echo the suggestions from Baker and Strunk/White. Using the passive too often and ignorance of when occasionally to use it are common writing shortcomings. "By eliminating passive verbs, you can often turn weak, slow-moving sentences into stronger, more vital ones" (Hairston and Ruszkiewicz, 1988, p. 323). Excessive use of the passive leads to weak sentences (Elsbree and Bracher, 1972). Habitual use of the passive voice is often a culprit in lifeless and wordy prose (McMahon and Day, 1988). Pussyfooting passive allows the writer to avoid naming the action agent—perhaps an advantage in journalism (Johnson, 1983), but seldom (if ever) in academic writing. "The passive voice is a hedge," Cheryl Reimold wrote. "You can hide behind it . . . . The passive voice offers a surreptitious way to pass the buck, to dissociate yourself from something you have done" (Reimold, 1988, p. 57). Geographers need to take credit for, not cover from, their actions.

John Fraser Hart would probably not
consider himself a grammarian. Nevertheless, his prescriptive piece, "Ruminations of a Dyspeptic Ex-Editor," fits in nicely here (1976). Hart had strong feelings about the voice that authors choose for their abstracts and texts. The abstract, Hart wrote, is "concerned with ideas, not facts and procedures. . . . The language of the abstract should be especially lean, taut, crisp, and hard-hitting. Use active verbs. Avoid such phrases as 'is discussed' and 'is described' and 'is presented'" (Hart, 1976, p. 227). In their texts, he believed, geographers should "use the active rather than the passive voice, noting 'I drew the maps' is better than 'The maps were drawn by me'" (p. 229).

**ABSTRACT EVIDENCE**

My focus in this review of geographers' written work is the abstract. For a conference paper, the published abstract will often be the only lasting component of the author's effort. For articles in professional journals, the properly structured abstract provides a convenient window not only to the author's methods and findings but also to his or her writing style. Hart considered the abstract "the most important part" of the article, despite the tendency of some to dash it "off almost as an afterthought" (Hart, 1976, p. 227).

I have chosen for analysis of abstracts (1) a pair of journals, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (*Annals*) and *The Professional Geographer* (*PG*); and (2) the collected abstracts from ten consecutive annual meetings of the Association of American Geographers (*AAG*). Abstracts that contained no evidence of the passive voice went into one column. Abstracts with at least one passive construction went into another. In all, I examined 1,419 article abstracts, the entire population of such abstracts to appear in the *Annals* (943) and *PG* (476), plus 1,148 annual-meeting abstracts—a grand total of 2,567.

Article abstracts appeared for the first time in the *Annals* of March 1965, under the editorship of Joseph E. Spencer, who had received a mandate for brief abstracts from the *AAG's Publications Committee* several months earlier (Pruitt, 1964). In a revised "Editorial Policy Statement," Spencer announced the abstract requirement to potential authors, indicating his preference for the active voice in such efforts:

> There are two kinds of abstracts employed in reports and journals at present, the descriptive and the informative. The descriptive abstract merely announces what is to be found in the paper, and is written in the passive voice. The informative abstract, written in the active voice, transmits information conclusions concerning the topic of the paper. The *Annals* abstract should be an informative one, . . . (Spencer, 1964, p. 446)

Spencer (editor, 1964–69) began, with that bit of advice, an editorial tradition among *Annals* editors that has continued, with only one exception, to the present. Later editors, Hart, John C. Hudson, and Stanley D. Brunn, have endorsed Spencer's call for authors to use the active voice. Hart (editor, 1970–75) said he would not accept a "descriptive abstract . . . written in the passive voice" and went on in his "Policy Statement" to offer what he considered a horrible example of a descriptive abstract: "The general hypothesis for the solution of this problem is presented through two alternative models. The evidence of a variety of tests of each model is presented, and the hypothesis is shown to be valid" (emphasis mine) (Hart, 1970, p. 195). Hudson (editor, 1976–81) requested that the "verbs in the abstract should be in the active voice," and Brunn (editor, 1988–) specified that not simply article abstracts but also manuscripts should be "in the active voice" (Hudson, 1976, p. 187; Brunn, 1988, p. iv). Only Susan Hanson (editor, 1982–87), assisted early on by Edgar C. Conkling, made no reference to voice (Hanson and Conkling, 1982).

Of the 943 article abstracts appearing in the *Annals*, March 1965 through December 1991, just 188 or 20 percent were completely free of the passive voice (Fig. 1). Spencer began on an encouraging
note in the March 1965 issue with five of his ten authors avoiding the passive, but over the next nineteen numbers (through December 1969) his percent of abstracts without the passive fell well below twenty. He ended his tenure with an overall success rate of 14 percent. Hart took the Annals helm in 1970, a year in which every abstract he published contained at least one passive-voice example; but he finished strongly, seeing several of his editorial years top 30 percent. Hart eventually published 60 abstracts (out of 236) without the passive, for a 25 percent rating. Hudson managed to keep all his annual percentages above the 1965–91 average and finished at 27 percent. Hanson avoided the passive voice in only 16 percent of the article abstracts she published—but, of course, avoidance of the passive was not a Hanson priority. Brunn's success rate slipped steadily in the first three years of his editorship, bottoming at four percent in 1990. He rebounded, however, to 24 percent in 1991. Overall, Brunn stands at 15 percent for his four Annals years.

Conkling (editor, 1978–May 1982) was the first PG editor to require article abstracts, publishing his first in May 1978 (Fig. 2). Both Brunn (editor, August 1982–1987), Conkling's successor, and recent editors, Jeanne and Paul Kay (co-editors, 1988–91), continued the abstract requirement. Despite the fact that none of these PG editors asked their authors to write abstracts in the active voice, the PG rate for avoiding the passive in abstracts (27%) exceeds that of the Annals (20%). A significant factor in keeping the PG rate relatively high is the strong likelihood that a PG abstract will be shorter than one in the Annals. The longer the abstract the greater the chance of an author, who either knows not or cares not about voice, slipping into the passive. Kay and Kay have been the most successful of the abstract-publishing PG editors (31% avoidance), with Conkling (27%) and Brunn (24%) close behind.

For many years the AAG has pub-

FIGURE 3. Percent of abstracts from annual meetings of the Association of American Geographers containing no passive voice, by year, 1982–1991. Percentages result from a systematic 10 percent sample of abstracts appearing in each annual volume of meeting abstracts.
lished the abstracts of the papers delivered at its annual meetings. Instructions for those wishing a place on the program of an annual meeting appear nearly a year earlier in the AAG Newsletter under the heading "Call for Papers," "Call for Abstracts," or "Call for Program Participation." My review of calls issued for meetings held 1972 through 1982 revealed no reference to voice either in the section dealing with abstracts, 1972–77, or in the program chair's model abstract, 1978–82. Merlin P. Lawson, program chair for the 1983 meeting, however, began a practice that has now become standard when he placed in his model abstract clear reference to the active voice. "Having done all the work myself," he wrote, "I will take credit for the success or failure of it by using the active voice" (Lawson, 1982, p. 6) (Table 1). Program chairs for the 1984 and 1985 meetings failed to reference voice in their (identically worded) calls for papers; but the 1986, Twin Cities, program chair came back with this statement: "By using active rather than passive voice, you transmit clearly the results of your work" (Baerwald, 1985, p. 15). Subsequent program chairs either employed the Twin Cities version or, more recently, this wording: "The abstract and presentation should use the active voice rather than the passive to transmit research results clearly and concisely" (Pederson, 1987, p. 10). Note that recent chairs advise participants to utilize the active voice in their presentations as well as in their publishable abstracts.

I have no way of checking on the voice choice of program presenters, but I do have access to their meeting abstracts. Annual meeting program committees published 11,528 abstracts for meetings held 1982 through 1991. I systematically sampled 10 percent of the published abstracts in each of 10 years for a total of 1,148. The results are generally dismal (Fig. 3). Lawson did succeed in improving eleven percentage points when we compare his 26 percent for the 1983 meeting with the 15 percent achieved by his 1982 predecessor, but the overall trend clearly points downward to the current level of about 10 percent. In fact, organizers of the two meetings immediately after Lawson’s had better success getting authors to avoid the passive—by saying nothing about the issue—than have subsequent program chairs.

RECOGNITION AND REVISION

Before anyone can learn to write in the active voice, he or she must recog-

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Total Abstracts</th>
<th>Sample Abstracts</th>
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<td>944</td>
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<td>No</td>
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<td>922</td>
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<td>823</td>
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Sources: AAG Program Abstracts and AAG Newsletters.
nize the passive—usually, but not always, a simple task. First, one must understand that the passive always includes a form of the verb "to be": is, was, has been, will have been, etc. Second, closely associated with the "to be" item in a passive expression occurs the past participle of a verb: (was) tested, (could be) developed, (may be) proposed, (were) challenged, (have been) hung, (is being) run. Third, one must be ready to ask if it is possible to attribute the action in the suspicious passage to an action agent. "The city is located [situated] on the coastal plain" is not passive because no action agent exists. On the other hand, "The lost tribe was located [found] by the research team" does contain a passive expression and would read better, in the active voice, as "the research team located the lost tribe." Beginners at the process of recognizing the passive voice should note that the first two steps usually prove sufficient.

The grammarians (and Hart) whom I cited above provide readers with paired examples of the passive and active for purposes of comparison. I believe a series of such pairs appropriate here; but, instead of devising my own, I have chosen to quote and rewrite sentences from abstracts I encountered in my survey of meeting programs and journals. The quoted sentences come from abstracts whose authors had in every (or nearly every) sentence of their abstracts something in the passive voice. My intention is not to embarrass anyone (author or editor); and, of course, I have admitted my earlier penchant for the passive. In my revisions of the chosen abstract sentences, I sometimes had to guess at the action agent because the authors failed (a common passive practice) to attribute the action. If I erred in my choice of agents, I apologize but remind abstract authors that any confusion on the reader's part comes back to a communication failure between author and reader. Emphases in each quoted sentence are mine.

Six Examples from Annals Abstracts

Passive: "Equations are also developed for designing a survey whose end product is to be an isoline map of specified variance" (Stearns, 1968, p. 590).
Active: I also developed equations for designing a survey whose end product is to be an isoline map of specified variance.

Passive: "The proposed system is illustrated by Australian data" (Oliver, 1970, p. 615).
Active: Australian data illustrate the proposed system.

Passive: "The more complex market centers are classified on the basis of these data" (Rowley, 1971, p. 537).
Active: On the basis of these data, I classified the more complex market centers.

Passive: "Control over population distribution also can be exerted indirectly through the selection of employment sites" (Barber, 1977, p. 239).
Active: Governments can indirectly exert control over population distribution through the selection of employment sites.

Passive: "The continuum model is explicated through the analysis of the historic preservation movement in Salzburg, Austria[,] since 1860" (Rowntree and Conkey, 1980, p. 459).
Active: We explicate the continuum model through the analysis of the historic preservation movement in Salzburg, Austria, since 1860.

Passive: "Overlooking Freetown, a segregated 'Hill Station' was constructed in 1904; it was connected by a custom-built 'mountain railway'" (Frenkel and Western, 1988, p. 211).
Active: Overlooking Freetown, Britain constructed a segregated "Hill Station" in 1904 and connected it to Freetown with a custom-built "mountain railway."
Six Examples from PG Abstracts

Passive: “This counterpart has been assumed to be objective distance” (MacEachren, 1980, p. 30).
Active: Psychologists have assumed this counterpart to be objective distance.

Passive: “In view of the strong need for new policy initiatives, the components of a techno-industrial strategy are evaluated” (Britton, 1981, p. 36).
Active: In view of the strong need for new policy initiatives, I evaluated the components of a techno-industrial strategy.

Passive: “Also a research agenda for geographic inquiry is proposed” (Hardesty, 1986, p. 11).
Active: I also propose a research agenda for geographic inquiry.

Passive: “Neglect by most geographers, especially political geographers, of one of the major issues of our time, that of war and peace, is criticized” (van der Wuster and O’Loughlin, 1986, p. 18).
Active: We criticize the neglect by most geographers, especially political geographers, of one of the major issues of our time—war and peace.

Passive: “Two knowledge extraction techniques for hard-to-trace expert reasoning are introduced” (Lundberg, 1989, p. 272).
Active: I introduce two knowledge extraction techniques for hard-to-trace expert reasoning.

Passive: “Recognition and explanation of the phenomenon occurred both earlier and more widely than is usually supposed” (Meyer, 1991, p. 38).
Active: Recognition and explanation of the phenomenon occurred both earlier and more widely than urban climatologists usually suppose.

Six Examples from AAG Annual Meeting Abstracts:

Passive: “The constraints are removed and new optimal location patterns are computed” (Rushton, 1982, p. 269).
Active: I removed the constraints and computed new optimal location patterns.

Passive: “Regional methodology is employed in order to delineate the spatial distribution of seaport-related land use within an urban area” (Morelli, 1983, p. 208).
Active: To delineate the spatial distribution of seaport-related land use within an urban area, I employ regional methodology.

Passive: “The difficulties associated with modeling the water balance of vineyards under drip irrigation will be demonstrated” (Hope, Evans, and Cliffe; 1989; p. 53).
Active: We will demonstrate the difficulties associated with modeling the water balance of vineyards under drip irrigation.

Passive: “Several different measures of spatial compactness have been developed” (Flaherty and Crumplin, 1990, p. 72).
Active: Geographers have developed several measures of spatial compactness.

Passive: “It was also found that linkages of trust, ... facilitated business transactions within this industrial agglomeration” (Hess, 1990, p. 103).
Active: I found that linkages of trust, ... facilitated business transactions within this industrial agglomeration.

Passive: “By identifying the physical attributes of each artifact, a source region from which these implements were quarried may be determined” (Vaughn, 1991, p. 204).
Active: By identifying the physical attributes of each artifact, an investigator may determine a source region from which the paleoIndians quarried these implements.
CLOSURE

When my conversion to the active voice occurred, I was nearing the end of the revisions on a book-length manuscript. To my typist’s dismay, I went back through the text again, activating hundreds of passive-voice constructions. My hope is that those reading this essay, who wish to improve their prose, will see the same light that I saw. We can make geographic writing (and speaking) better by recognizing the passive voice and using, in most cases, the active voice.

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REFERENCES
