



Humans vs. Zombies: Using the Active Voice in History

Historians study the choices flesh and blood people made when confronted by the challenges of their time. To convey this sense of historical action and contingency, they write whenever possible in the **active voice**. They “populate” their prose with “human **subjects**,” as Nora Bacon has said, and they use active **verbs** to show what people did.¹

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Verb</i>	<i>Object</i>
<u>White Democrats</u>	established	a new regime of racial servitude during Reconstruction.

The passive voice, by contrast, obscures the human actor:

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Verb</i>
<u>A new regime of racial servitude</u>	was established during Reconstruction.

In this example, the real stars of the show, the white Democrats, are nowhere to be found. The human agents have been replaced by an abstraction—“a new regime.” The problem is clear: by omitting (or delaying) the agent of the action, the passive voice puts history on autopilot—as if unthinking zombies and not people drove events!

Identifying Passive Voice Locate passive constructions by analyzing the verb or verbs in the sentence. If a verb is formed with a “to be” word (is, was, were) plus a past participle (established, opposed, broken), then you have the passive voice. Or, apply this trick: if you can follow the verb with “by zombies,” you are using the passive voice.

<i>by zombies</i>	<i>and by zombies</i>
It has long <u>been believed</u> ^ that the Civil War <u>was fought</u> by Lincoln ^ to free the slaves.	

Fixing the Passive Voice Make passive sentences active by putting the agent of the action (the *doer*) before the verb. Sometimes the human actor is hiding later in the sentence (as Lincoln is in the above example). Sometimes the actor is missing altogether, and you’ll need to add it. This writer has added the agent “Americans.”

<i>subj.</i>	<i>verb</i>	<i>subj.</i>	<i>verb</i>
Most Americans	believe	that Lincoln	fought

Most Americans believe that Lincoln fought the Civil War to free the slaves.

Is the Passive Voice Always Bad? No. When the recipient of the action is more important than the agent, you may want to use the passive voice. Here, it is more important to name King Louis XVI than to begin with the people who executed him:

Louis XVI was guillotined on January 21, 1793.

¹ Nora Bacon, *The Well-Crafted Sentence* (New York: Bedford, 2009), 26.