

Power Active

Divest oneself of passivity.
—DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING

In 1904 General Eisenhower asked Winston Churchill to look over a speech he had drafted. Churchill read it and said, "Dwight, it has too many passives and too many zeds."

"Zed" is what the British say for the letter we call "zee," and Churchill was referring to the verbs "systemize," "prioritize," and "finalize" in Eisenhower's text. Churchill would say "end" or "finish" instead of "finalize", but his main complaint was Ike's use of the passive voice. That's when the true subject—the doer of the action—either is not in the sentence at all or is relegated to object of a preposition.

Passive Is Pale

Look over these four lines:

1. "When liberty is given up to purchase a little temporary safety, then neither liberty nor safety is deserved.
2. "Liberty is granted only to those who love it."
3. "An inevitable victory will be obtained."

4. "Eighty-seven years ago a new government was established."

Get the point?

For the first example, the actual words of Benjamin Franklin read:

They that give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety.

The second example was a corruption of Daniel Webster's famous line:

God grants liberty to those who love it.

The third example turns a line from President Franklin Roosevelt's "day of infamy" address after Pearl Harbor to passive. The real version reads:

We shall gain the inevitable triumph.

The fourth example makes the opening sentence of the Gettysburg Address sound insipid—not only because "fourscore and seven" was changed but also because "our fathers brought forth upon this continent" was turned around to the passive voice. The sentence no longer includes "our fathers"—those responsible for bringing forth our new nation.

We do not need to make up examples, however. In February 1942, at a time when America faced the threat of bombing by both the Germans and the Japanese, an official from the General Services Administration presented Franklin Roosevelt with a copy of a notice that would be placed in every room of every government office across the land. The bureaucrat read this aloud to the president:

PASSIVE VOICE IS WHEN THE TRUE SUBJECT—THE DOER OF THE ACTION—EITHER IS NOT IN THE SENTENCE AT ALL OR IS RELEGATED TO OBJECT OF A PREPOSITION.

IT IS OBLIGATORY THAT ALL
ILLUMINATION BE EXTINGUISHED
BEFORE THE PREMISES ARE
VACATED.

Roosevelt, known for his clear communication, wryly replied,

Why the hell can't you say "Put out the lights when you leave"?

Put Passives Down the Rathole

In June 1940, President Roosevelt, along with his aide and friend, Harry Hopkins, tuned in to hear Prime Minister Winston Churchill's speech on the fall of France, after which Britain stood alone in Europe against the Nazi invaders.

In the residential quarters on the second floor of the White House, the president and Hopkins heard Churchill say this:

We shall fight them on the beaches, we shall fight them on the landing grounds, we shall fight them in the streets and in the hills. We shall never surrender.

Roosevelt turned to Hopkins and said:

Well, Harry, as long as that old bastard's in charge, Britain will never surrender. It's not like putting money down the rathole as in France.

Churchill's words had left no doubt that England was willing to take responsibility. Because of that speech, a neutral United States dispatched arms and weaponry to a beleaguered Britain.

In May 1940, when Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain resigned, a coalition of three parties replaced the Conservative government. The choice was between Churchill and Labour leader Clement Attlee.

Churchill once described Attlee as "a modest man with much to be modest about." A Churchill aide once came up with this passive version of how Attlee would have declared his resolve:

It is imperative that the defenses of the coastal perimeter should be maintained.

Do you think that if Roosevelt had heard British determination expressed in that "passive" voice, he would have broken his nation's neutrality to send destroyers as well as supplies in merchant ships?

Webster's Dictionary defines the passive voice with this:

In grammar indicating that the subject is the receiver (object) of the action the verb denotes (e.g. the tree was struck by lightning).

But "passive" is also defined as "unresisting mentally or physically, inactive, lifeless, unenthusiastic."

Passive Voice, Passive Mind

There is good reason this form of grammatical construction is called the passive voice, as verbal constructions employing the passive voice too often suggest the passive state of mind that is represented by the other definition of "passive."

Was it unfair for Churchill's aide to ascribe to Attlee what *he might have said*? Well, read what Deputy Prime Minister Clement Attlee actually said about social problems after the war. He told an International Labor Conference this:

We are determined that economic questions and questions of the universal improvement of living and nutrition shall not be neglected after the last war owing to the preoccupation with political problems.

VERBAL CONSTRUCTIONS
EMPLOYING THE
PASSIVE VOICE TOO OFTEN
SUGGEST THE PASSIVE
STATE OF MIND.

That kind of speaking would drive Sominex out of business!

Whabby, Flabby

In wartime London, some ranking members of Churchill's own cabinet spoke in "bureaucratese." One was the education minister, Richard Austen Butler, who was also called "Rab" for his initials.

Politicians called Butler "Wab" behind his back, because he pronounced the letter "R" as a "W," much as when Elmer Fudd calls Bugs Bunny "a wascal."

One afternoon Churchill's presence was required while "Wab" Butler delivered a turgid and convoluted address explaining his plan for the restructuring of state schools.

The impatient prime minister, following along on the handed-out text of Butler's talk, began to underline all the auxiliaries in the "to be" family of words that precede the passive verb construction.

Were established
Have been propounded
Are constructed
Be safeguarded

Then Churchill wrote this in the margin:

Whab is flabby and blabby.

Well, when you finish writing your first draft of a statement or a talk, check it for "Whabby" words, such as these:

Were,
Have, had
Are, is
Be, been

The acronym "WHAB" can help you find words that sound a warning bell for potential overuse of the passive.

Exculpatory Voice (or "Cover-Your-Ass Passive")

Churchill called the passive voice the "exculpatory voice." The passive is the verbal tool of those who want to exonerate themselves. Here are a few examples:

Certain misstatements were made.

(Not "We lied.")

Reductions in personnel may be instituted.

(Not "We are going to fire a lot of employees.")

Certain errors in judgment were made.

(Not "We goofed.")

The passive is for the "cover-your-ass" types. But the active voice is for the take-charge leaders. The passive is not the voice of a leader. The passive is the voice of the bureaucrat who wants to duck responsibility. He or she might say this:

The policy will be implemented . . .

The leader, on the other hand, would say this:

Let's do it!

Passives rob a talk of life and action. They turn the vibrant words of punchy conversation into the pale gray of "governmentese."

The passive voice construction is the turtle of grammar. The slow and plodding turtle is distinguished by his ability to retract his head and hide it underneath his shell. The passive compared to the active

**THE PASSIVE IS FOR THE
"COVER-YOUR-ASS" TYPES.
BUT THE ACTIVE VOICE
IS FOR THE TAKE-
CHARGE LEADERS.**

voice is not only more cumbersome but also deprives the listener of information about the actor or perpetrator of the action. Take this sentence:

The jobs will be terminated by December 1.

What the listener really wants to know is *who is responsible* for the firings, a detail that a weakling corporate executive would prefer to hide.

Some corporate executives like the passive because it uses convoluted phrasing that they think seems more authoritative because it sounds complex. They're wrong. The active voice provides force to your speech, whereas the passive voice sounds spineless and deadens your delivery.

So toss out the tendentious turtles and pick up your pace.

Try to find a passive verb construction in Napoleon's address to his troops before the Italians. Try to spot one in Susan B. Anthony's speech in 1873 to a women's rights group in Seneca. Try to discover one in Franklin Roosevelt's first inaugural address in 1933.

Finally, check out Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. You'll find no "passives" there, either.

So use a Power Active and empower your delivery. Don't be a "whabby" wimp. Be like Churchill, and charge up your presentation with some energy.

THE ACTIVE VOICE
PROVIDES FORCE TO YOUR
SPEECH, WHEREAS THE
PASSIVE VOICE SOUNDS
SPINELESS AND DEADENS
YOUR DELIVERY.