

Editorial corner – a personal view

Should the passive voice be forced indiscriminately?

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I am an electrical engineer, English teacher and linguist. I have been researching English grammar, pronunciation and style for over thirty years. I have written a book on English pronunciation and a three-volume English grammar book. For the past seven years, however, I have been focusing on the correct use of scientific and academic English and have proofread and corrected the English of a large number of manuscripts in polymer science.

Nowadays it is common practice that reviewers criticise the English of papers as well, as they are also asked by publishers. It is good because grammar and vocabulary mistakes make it difficult or impossible to understand the paper clearly, if at all. However, reviewers do not notice many actual grammar problems such as dangling modifiers or the incorrect use of articles. A far greater problem is that they often criticise perfectly correct sentences. For some unimaginable reason, many reviewers think that a scientific article should be written in the passive voice and not contain the words ‘I’, ‘we’, ‘my’ or ‘our’.

Nothing could be further from the truth. There is absolutely no such rule. Actually, many style guides and journals explicitly state that the passive voice should not be overused. Some examples:

Elsevier: [Writing Style Guidelines](#),

Springer: [Concise writing](#),

APA Style Guide 6th Edition: [APA Stylistics: Basics](#),

APA 7th Edition: [The 17 Most Notable Changes](#).

Also, a language does not work like that. One cannot make arbitrary rules in English. Could I say, for example, that from now on ‘medical language’ means everything in the past must be written in a future tense and everything happening in the future must

be written in a past tense? Because that is ‘medical language’? (It would not lead to misunderstanding, because the tenses would be used consistently.) No. English is always the same, there is no such thing as ‘scientific English’, ‘medical English’, or ‘legal English’ grammar. Obviously, each field has its own terminology but that is not grammar.

English is the same in different situations—grammar always works the same way. Let us see four examples:

- A reviewer requires that the passive is used in the Abstract in sentences like ‘A new composite has been developed’. instead of ‘We have developed a new composite’.
- A researcher gives a speech at a conference introducing his own research results and says ‘Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. A new composite has been developed...’
- A child who has won a school contest goes home to tell their parents the good news: ‘I am so happy! The contest has been won!’
- A man confesses his love to a woman: ‘You are loved’.

The passive voice works the same way in all four examples. How acceptable or unacceptable is the passive voice in these examples? Equally unacceptable. The correct use of the passive and active voice is governed by intricate rules in English. An article written in correct English contains both the active voice and the passive voice in the right places.

It is quite surprising that many reviewers try to force authors who may be using both the active voice and the passive voice correctly in their paper to use incorrect English (only passive, without ‘I’ or ‘we’ or even ‘our’) in the paper and thus significantly reduce

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the quality of the article. Well, it is not only surprising, it is harmful, and reviewers should immediately stop doing this. After all, reviewers of scientific articles are rarely linguists as well, and so they are by no means qualified to order authors to use the passive

incorrectly. Nobody is. Publishers also have a responsibility in educating reviewers (through Guides for authors). Express Polymer Letters also encourages authors and reviewers to use both the active voice and the passive voice correctly in manuscripts.



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Member of Executive Editorial Board