

Dysfunctional Pseudo-Elegance

Why Passive and Nominal Writing Fails

Lloyd R. Bostian

Writers and editors in land-grant universities and government agencies know bad style when they see it, and they see it regularly. The bulk of academic and bureaucratic writing is passive and nominal, and the editor struggles to transform this bane into active, verbal style.

Most bad writers think they are good, primarily because their colleagues respect their lousy prose; the dull, academic style may find a place in the prestigious technical journal or even merit a promotion or salary increase. But this doesn't mean the academic style communicates efficiently to readers, not even of technical journals, or to deans and administrators.

As a student and teacher of editing, I'm convinced that passive voice and nominalization are among the worst writing weaknesses because they hide the action in a sentence. Passive voice has two obvious faults — it uses more words than active voice and the subject of the sentence is not the actor-agent. Passive either eliminates the actor or places the actor at the end of the sentence. Nominal prose is dull because it substitutes nouns for verbs, and the few remaining verbs are mostly weak ones or forms of "to be." Early developers of readability formulas found out how damaging a high noun-to-verb ratio can be.

Good editors transform passive and nominal styles into a verbal style — with the actor up front and the action stated in a powerful verb. But this is rewriting — it transforms the style — and authors sometimes rebel at this much-needed

Bostian is professor of agricultural journalism, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and a former president of ACE.

surgery. To ease the prose-slashed patient's suffering, editors should arm themselves with proof, from research, that active writing is best. The research reported here might give you the remedy to avoid the offended writer's backlash.

I researched these questions: Do passive and nominal styles slow the reader? Are they more difficult to comprehend than an active style? Are passive and nominal styles judged as interesting and easy to read as active writing?

First — A Brief Review

Here's a brief review of what other researchers have found in comparing active style to passive or nominal. Research shows that the more technical the writing, the higher proportion of passive verbs. Svartvik counted 23 passive verbs per 1000 words in science texts, but found only 3 passive per 1000 words in television commercials. Similarly, Funkhouser measured the percentage of *active words* in a range of publications, finding a much higher percentage in popular magazines than in technical journals.

Other researchers, including DeVito, have found that active voice sentences are easier to comprehend or recall than are passive sentences. However, the relative importance of the subject and object of the sentence determines whether active is better than passive. (Carroll, 1958) If the reader expects the object to be first, then passive may be as comprehensible as active. (Herriot) Also, if readers attach more significance to the object, then passive is as comprehensible. (Clark; Johnson-Laird) Finally, experience with processing passive voice can mute the negative effects — we know that scientists and government officials can process passive better than can the general public because they are more accustomed to it. Nevertheless, passive usually is less comprehensible than active.

Nominal style has not been researched as extensively as has passive voice, partly because, as Wells points out, it is not a pure dimension of style. In changing verbal to nominal style, the effect isn't simply that of changing a verb to a noun, because other aspects of style and sentence structure automatically change with the verb-to-noun change. Coleman (1971) says that to change a nominal to a verbal, i.e. to change the word "inclusion" to "include," makes tense, voice, aspect and mood more specific. He judges that

“much of the abstractness in scientific writing must be attributed to a reason no more profound than its tradition against I and We . . . avoiding them frequently causes writers to substitute a nominal for its active verb form.”

Wells suggests that scientists favor the indefiniteness of nominal — it is easy to write, is impersonal, is not conversational (sets writer apart from reader), and is equivocal (less definite in person, number and tense). But scientists aren't the only professionals who value nominal style. Hake and Williams found that English composition teachers graded essays written in nominal style higher than the clearer, more direct verbal style essays. Graders overwhelmingly preferred the nominal versions to the verbal ones, and high school teachers valued the nominal higher than did the college teachers.

Hake and Williams concluded that the least sophisticated teachers were the most impressed with what appeared to be verbal sophistication — nominal style. Their judgments seemed to be that profound style equals profound content and intellectual quality. In fact, even though teachers found more errors in the nominal papers, they graded them higher.

Hake and Williams, in a related experiment, tested whether nominal is more difficult to process than verbal. They gave papers to 70 typists of different abilities to see if typing speed and errors would differ. High school typists typed the verbal 20 percent faster with 22 percent fewer errors than the nominal. Professional typists typed verbal 8 percent faster with no differences in errors. Thus the nominal is more difficult to process cognitively, and is most difficult for persons with less experience in processing nominal style.

Coleman concludes that prose having a low proportion of verbs carries a heavy load of superfluous complexity, hence the processing difficulty. He found a negative correlation of $-.76$ between nominal style and close scores. Coleman (1964) also measured recall of material using active verbs versus nominalization. He found active verb sentences better recalled than sentences with abstract nouns nominalized from a verb. Other researchers have found that nominalization produces a style that is less active, more monotonous, more abstract, more difficult to recall, with more prepositions, and with longer, more complicated sentences. (Carroll, 1960; Marschark & Paivio)

We expect active style to outperform passive and nominal styles. We expect nominal to be read slower, with less comprehension, and to be perceived as less interesting and less easy to read, than either of the verbal styles, active or passive.

Method for My Study

I selected two research articles and rewrote them in the three styles. An article concerning injuries to runners (running) was based on material from a sports medicine journal. The second article, concerning alfalfa's need for sulfur (soils) originally appeared in a soil science journal. I selected these two topics for subject matter comparisons, expecting higher interest in the running topic than the soils topic.

I first prepared the active voice article for each topic, making certain that all transitive verbs were active. Then I rewrote the active version, changing transitive verbs to passive, except in a few cases where more than one passive verb in the sentence would have made wording too awkward. More than 90 percent of the transitive verbs were passive. Finally, I reduced the active version to nominal style by substituting nouns or gerunds for most verbs.

To illustrate the three styles, here are the lead sentences taken from the running article:

- ACTIVE** — Researchers have found that more and more Americans are running to achieve physical fitness.
- PASSIVE** — It has been found by researchers that more and more Americans are running to achieve physical fitness.
- NOMINAL** — The finding of researchers is that more and more Americans are running for the achievement of physical fitness.

We tested the three styles on 266 University of Wisconsin-Madison students. The six versions (three styles x two topics) were randomly distributed with no indication that students had different versions. Testing was divided between two classes to facilitate the comprehension test.

To determine reading speed (amount read), we instructed students to read at a normal pace, stopping them after 2 minutes 10 seconds. Most students read 60-70 percent of the material in this time, with only 1 percent reading all.

After the timed reading, we instructed students to finish reading. The comprehension test, 10 fact-retention questions, followed. We did not inform students they would be questioned about the material. Finally, students rated their article as to how familiar they were with the topic, how interesting the material was to read, and how easy it was to read.

Before testing these versions on readers, we analyzed the three styles. Although we began with equal length active passages of 561 words, the transformation to passive and nominal styles increased total words to 651 and 669 respectively. Thus these simple verbal changes produced copy that is 16 percent (passive) and 19 percent (nominal) longer than it was in active style.

The average sentence length of 15.1 words and syllable count of 169.5 for the six versions produced a Flesch Reading Ease score of 6.68 — in the quality range. Although the sentence length is comparable to that of popular material (such as farm magazines), the syllable count is normal for scientific material.

Results

Active passages were read significantly faster than passive and nominal styles (7 percent and 9 percent respectively) for both topics (Results in Table 1). Although *reading speed* is not significantly different between passive and nominal, nominal is read slower than passive.

We hypothesized lower *comprehension* scores for passive and nominal, however, differences are insignificant. This may be partly due to our test subjects being university students with considerable experience in processing passive and nominal. We would expect greater comprehension differences for subjects who have less familiarity with passive and nominal. In fact, in a related experiment, Sweeney found highly significant differences among high school students in their comprehension of the running topic version — with passive and nominal less comprehensible than active. Also, our comprehension questions were simple fact-retention questions not requiring analysis or reasoning. Nominal would be more likely to show comprehension effects if questions required conceptual manipulations.

TABLE 1

Reading Speed and Comprehension, Perceived Familiarity,
Reading Ease and Interest for Two Versions of
Active, Passive and Nominal Styles

		Active	Passive	Nominal	
Reading Speed (Sentence read)	running	32.02	29.68	29.02	p<.05
	soils	31.05	28.84	28.62	p<.05
	total	31.53	29.26	28.82	p<.05
Comprehension (mean correct answers in 10 questions)	running	6.55	6.61	5.96	n.s.
	soils	5.16	5.02	5.31	n.s.
	total	5.85	5.87	5.63	n.s.
Perceived Familiarity (mean on scale of 1-10)	running	5.55	6.02	5.63	n.s.
	soils	5.14	3.91	3.96	p<.05
	total	5.34	4.94	4.77	n.s.
Perceived Interest (mean on scale of 1-10)	running	6.68	6.00	6.19	n.s.
	soils	5.36	4.67	3.78	p<.05
	total	6.02	5.32	4.95	p<.05
Perceived Reading Ease (mean on scale of 1-10)	running	6.52	6.32	5.72	n.s.
	soils	5.82	5.43	5.40	n.s.
	total	6.17	5.87	5.56	n.s.

Because we randomized our groups, we expected readers would not report differences in *familiarity* of material. Although this was true for the running topic, soils topic readers judged the nominal and passive passages to be significantly less familiar than the active (see discussion below on effects of subject matter).

Reader interest was significantly higher for the active style. The soils version accounts for most of the significance with the nominal passage perceived as especially uninteresting. Actually, neither passage was rated very interesting on the 1-10 scale. We expected this, since both passages are technical material based on research. The range of interest is substantial, however, from the 6.68 active-running version, down to the 3.78 nominal-soils version.

Perceived *reading ease* scores are similar for the three styles. However, although differences are not significant, results are in the direction hypothesized — active is judged slightly easier to read, passive next, and nominal last.

In determining the *effects of subject matter*, we assumed that the soils topic, being conceptually more difficult, less familiar, and inherently less interesting, would score lower on all measures than the more popular running topic. The results show this to be true. The running topic was read faster, comprehended better and judged more interesting and easier to read than was the soils topic for all styles — active, passive and nominal. Because we distributed versions randomly to test subjects, we expected no difference in familiarity for running and soils versions. However, readers judged the passive and nominal versions of the soils topic to be significantly less familiar. We conclude that an active style enhances the perception of familiarity of an inherently dull topic.

Conclusions

The results make it clear that readers prefer an active style — they judge it to be more interesting and they can read it significantly faster. Nominal style is clearly the poorest choice of the three styles — it ranks below active and passive in every measure.

We suspect the inadequacies of passive and nominal styles would have even greater impact in science writing for the general public. Our tests are conservative — we selected scientific material of inherently low interest and tested it with persons experienced in decoding passive and nominal styles.

Furthermore, the average sentence length of 15 words in test passages is 5 to 10 words below the norm for science writing. Previous research shows that nominalization adds complexity, so longer sentences in nominal style would likely be more complex and reduce comprehension further. Similarly, our comprehension test was conservative in asking only fact-retention questions and not the more difficult analytical or reasoning questions.

This research backs the principle that the clearest style uses a grammatical structure that reflects the semantic structure. Bad scientific writing is bad when it departs from an agent-action style.

Wells says scientists prefer the nominal style because it is easy to write, is impersonal, aloof and less definite. Hake and Williams says teachers like nominal because they believe it reflects verbal sophistication. Lanham and Mitchell say bureaucrats use it to avoid personal responsibility

and involvement. Nevertheless, no matter how much and why we value it, nominal style is a poor choice for effective communication; it is dysfunctional pseudo-elegance.

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