

**SOME STYLISTIC FEATURES OF
BUSINESS AND TECHNICAL WRITING:
THE FUNCTIONS OF PASSIVE VOICE,
NOMINALIZATION, AND AGENCY**

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ABSTRACT

By studying a selection of business and technical texts, one can determine the functions of and the interactions between passive voice, nominalizations, and expressions of agency. One discovers that the distinction between dynamic and stative uses of verbs is crucial for understanding the various functions of passive sentences and nominalizations in business and technical writing. Then the functions of passive sentences and nominalizations are enumerated and illustrated with sentences from business and technical texts before discussing the various devices for expressing agency in passive and nominalized sentences. Only by understanding the various functions of these sentence types can instructors of business and technical writing offer specific and practical advice.

There is nothing new in saying that business and technical writers often overuse the passive voice, convert adjectives and verbs into nouns (a process often called *nominalization*), or are inexplicit about the agent (the person[s] or thing[s] doing the action described by the verb). Professionals interested in business and technical writing style often discuss the features of voice, nominalization, and expressions of agency in the prose of business and technical writing. Those discussions of style focus on the *frequency* with which those constructions occur, yet another (more interesting) stylistic description focuses on the *functions* of those constructions. Functional descriptions of style are more valuable since they offer some understanding of communicative purpose and, thus, explain the use and frequency of stylistic features. In this article, I will

describe the functions served by passive voice, nominalization, and various expressions of agency.

It is interesting to note that some handbooks give stylistic advice without fully appreciating the functions of those features. The handbooks generally advise against overuse but do not always advise writers on the use of such constructions. Given only proscription, business and technical writers may mistakenly believe that any use of passive voice, nominalization, or agentless sentences is inappropriate.

For example, Strong and Eidson offer this advice about passive sentences [1, p. 20] :

Because the subject of the passive voice is inert, because the passive is less direct, it tends to become tiresome, and has even been called the “deadly passive.” It is a good rule to avoid the passive unless you wish to place emphasis upon the object (for example: “Specifications are determined before the proposal is drawn up.”).

That limited discussion of passive’s functions creates an unnecessary bias against a potentially useful sentence type.

In contrast to Strong and Eidson, however, Brusaw *et al.* not only discuss the use of passive voice for appropriate emphasis but also outline two additional functions of the passive [2, pp. 624-625] :

There are, however, certain instances when the passive voice is effective or even necessary. When the performer of the action is either unknown or unimportant, use the passive voice Or when the performer of the action is less important than the receiver of the action, the passive voice is sometimes more appropriate.

This advice is more valuable, I think, simply because it suggests that passive voice is one more tool a writer can use to express his message effectively. A writer will learn that lesson only when he understands the functions of the constructions in question.

THE INTERACTION OF PASSIVE VOICE, NOMINALIZATION, AND AGENCY

Part of the difficulty in describing the functions of passive voice, nominalization, and agency results from the fact that those features often interact, or co-occur, in the prose of business and technical writing. For example, a writer may readily nominalize an active, agentive clause like (A) as in (B).

- (A) Free radicals oxidize cell membranes.
- (B) The free radicals’ oxidation of cell membranes

The nominalization, as well as the clause, can undergo a transformation to passive voice, cf. (C) and (D).

- (C) Cell membranes are oxidized by free radicals.
- (D) The cell membranes' oxidation by free radicals

Moreover, both the passive nominalization and the passive clause may occur with the agentive *by*-adjunct, as in (C) and (D), or without, as in (E) and (F).

- (E) Cell membranes are oxidized.
- (F) The cell membranes' oxidation

When stylistic features co-occur, it is more difficult to understand the function of any one feature, yet that is partly why those features are so interesting.

THE STATIVE AND DYNAMIC FUNCTIONS OF VERBS

However, the distinction between stative and dynamic functions of verbs may explain how passive voice, nominalization, and agency function and interact in business and technical writing. The dynamic function of a verb expresses actions or processes while the stative function of a verb expresses the stability of a state or relation which often seems the result of past action. Several syntactic properties suggest whether a particular verb is functioning statively or dynamically. Generally, stative verbs cannot occur in certain language structures or with certain words while dynamic verbs can. Consider these examples:

<i>Structure</i>	<i>Stative</i>	<i>Dynamic</i>
progressive	*John is <i>knowing</i> the answers. ¹	John is <i>painting</i> the room.
imperative	* <i>Know</i> the answer.	<i>Find</i> the answer.
manner adverbs	*John <i>knows</i> the answer quietly.	John <i>talks</i> quietly.

Stative verbs like *see*, *know*, and *remember* are unacceptable in progressive or imperative structures and with manner adverbs.

The same verb may have both a stative and dynamic function, and since the progressive aspect of the verbs indicates process, stative verbs do not allow the progressive, cf. (G).

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|---|--|---|---------|---|---------|
| (G) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. John <i>saw</i> a doctor. 2. John <i>is seeing</i> a doctor. 3. John <i>saw</i> this room. 4. *John <i>is seeing</i> this room. | <table style="border: none;"> <tr> <td style="font-size: 2em; vertical-align: middle;">}</td> <td style="vertical-align: middle;">dynamic</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="font-size: 2em; vertical-align: middle;">}</td> <td style="vertical-align: middle;">stative</td> </tr> </table> | } | dynamic | } | stative |
| } | dynamic | | | | | |
| } | stative | | | | | |

The stative function of verbs is not limited to the active voice and many passive sentences contain stative verbs. For example, the following sentences have

¹ The asterisk marks ungrammatical sentences, i.e., sentences that seem unnatural when judged by native speakers of English using their intuitive knowledge of what is and is not a well-formed English sentence.

stative verbs, as determined by the tests for stativity mentioned above, and passive voice.²

- (H) 1. . . . all employees must have a clear understanding of the action *to be taken* when a shoplifter *is discovered* [3, p. 54].
2. Never indicate that a mistake *has been made* [3, p. 55].
3. . . . safeguard the merchandise . . . and *be prepared* to show continuity of possession [3, p. 56].
4. . . . the Baldor specs called for the wrong thermal which *has* now since *been corrected* [3, p. 68].
5. The gases . . . emit sufficient radiation . . . that occupation of the reactor building *is severely limited* . . . [4, p. 1-1].
6. The staff is fully aware of public sentiment against . . . release of . . . radioactive materials . . . regardless of how small the dose consequences *are suspected* to be [4, p. 1-3].
7. . . . before the facility *can be* either *decommissioned or recovered* . . . [4, p. 3-1].
8. . . . occupancy *is severely restricted* [4, p. 3-2].
9. . . . gases *purged* from the reactor building *would be diluted* with less contaminated air . . . [4, p. 6-1].
10. Release the merchandise *marked* for identification [3, p. 56].
11. . . . reach the place *selected* for the interview . . . [3, p. 55].
12. . . . access . . . is necessary to facilitate the gathering of data *needed* for planning . . . [4, p. 4-1].

Sentences (H1) through (H9) illustrate the statal passive in finite clauses, i.e., clauses with a verb marked for tense and mood. In sentence (H1), for example, the participle *discovered* functions as a subject complement modifying *shoplifter*. The adjectival nature of the participle can be seen by substituting (or coordinating) an adjective with a similar meaning for the participial form, e.g., . . . *when a shoplifter is (discovered and) obvious*. Likewise, in sentence (H3), one can substitute the adjective *ready* for the participle *prepared*, as in . . . *and be ready to show continuity* . . . , or one can demonstrate the adjectival character of *corrected* in (H4) by noticing that *corrected* modifies *thermal* through the use of the participle in a relative clause. One can see the modifying relationship more directly in the paraphrase *the thermal has been corrected*.

Similarly, sentences (H9) through (H12) illustrate the statal passive in non-finite clauses, i.e., clauses with verbs not marked for tense and mood. In sentence (H9), *purged from the reactor* substitutes with other adjectival forms,

² The corpus for this study is *Business Reports* by William Rivers [3] and *Environmental Assessment for Decontamination of the Three Mile Island Unit 2 Reactor Building Atmosphere* prepared by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff [4].

such as *free of the reactor* or *clear of the reactor*, with similar meaning. Also, the participle *needed* in sentence (H12) modifies *data* as could the adjective *necessary* with a similar meaning. Though it may be difficult to interpret each of the italicized verbs as statal passives, the bulk of the data does show stative function in both finite and non-finite passive clauses.

THE ADJECTIVAL QUALITIES AND FUNCTIONS OF STATAL PASSIVES

In addition to substitution used above as a test for stativity, two additional syntactic properties of statal passives suggest that the participial verb functions like an adjective and that the auxiliary *be* functions like a copula, i.e., a linking verb, as in *John is tired*. First, the statal passive has no corresponding active sentence. The clause *Never indicate that X has made a mistake* corresponds to the dynamic reading of *Never indicate that a mistake has been made*, but the statal reading has a sense of the past tense or perfective aspect, which is missing from the active voice clause.

Secondly, in statal passives, it is possible to coordinate an adjective and a participial verb, cf. (I).

- (I) The gases . . . emit sufficient radiation . . . that occupation of the reactor building is [*dangerous and*] severely *limited* . . .

Since coordination is only possible between elements of similar function, participial verbs in statal passives must be adjectival.

The stative function of the verb in those passive sentences not only controls the adjectival interpretation of the participial verb, but it also controls agency in those sentences in that agentive *by*-adjuncts never occur in statal passives; therefore, statal passives by their nature never occur with an overt expression of agency. The agent *by*-phrase only allows a dynamic reading of the verb. Compare (J1) and (J2), for example. Sentence (J1) can only be interpreted as a statal passive while (J2) can only be interpreted as a dynamic passive.

- (J) 1. The possibility of future accidental releases is . . . [constant and] increased . . .
 2. The possibility of future accidental releases is . . . increased by continued reliance on unmaintained equipment [4, p. 1-3].

As examples (G) and (J) indicate, ambiguity can exist between stative function and dynamic function in many passive sentences. That ambiguity motivates the prohibition against passive voice in instructions. For example, *Plates A and B should be marked for revision* is ambiguous between the dynamic reading which has the agentive *by*-adjunct deleted and the statal reading which has *should* as an auxiliary expressing perfective aspect, *be* as a copula, and *marked* as an adjective. With the exception of these ambiguous sentences, most

handbooks do not discuss statal passives, focusing instead on the stylistic consequences of using dynamic passives rather than their active counterparts.

FUNCTIONS OF DYNAMIC PASSIVES

Dynamic passives have six functions in the corpus, and many of these functions are discussed in handbooks. First, they help maintain the topic of conversation when the corresponding active voice sentence would inappropriately place the wrong constituent into thematic (i.e., sentence-initial) position. For example, consider this paragraph in which the topic of conversation is Cities Service Company, identified in the first person *we/our*.

- (K) Now for some of our measurements. Within the 20 largest oil companies, we rank 16th in gasoline sales, 17th in distillate sales, and 18th in refining capacity. *We are recognized as a "major" oil company by many, but . . .* [3, p. 29].

The last clause in (K) is passive to facilitate the topic – Cities Service Company. The active voice would seem peculiar here since it would emphasize the public in a paragraph about Cities Service Company.

Second, the dynamic passive can provide coherence in a text by the inversion of active voice subject and object noun phrases, cf. (L).

- (L) Refining, Marketing and Transportation is responsible for Cities Service Company's oil operations from the wellhead to the consumer – the downstream activities of the Company. *Details of these operations are presented in the remainder of this booklet* [3, p. 29].

The concord subject in this passive sentence refers back to the earlier sentence and even contains the anaphoric item *these*.

Third, dynamic passives can avoid awkward, "heavy" subjects in the active voice, cf. (M).

- (M) The three processing trains are supported by *a hydrogen storage system, a liquid nitrogen storage system, and a noble gas storage system* [4, p. 6-24].

The noun phrase in the *by*-adjunct would not make the corresponding active sentence clearer, more concise, or easier to understand.

Fourth, the dynamic passive allows end-focus [5, p. 943] on a constituent that is thematically or informationally prominent, cf. (N).

- (N) We have always been a leader in the development of joint venture pipeline systems. This is best exemplified by *Colonial Pipeline, the world's largest and most successful products system* [3, p. 39].

Fifth, the passive is necessary when the agent is unknown or unimportant. And finally, the passive is useful when the writer desires to conceal the agent. Example (O) could illustrate either function, depending on the writer's knowledge of the agent (and his willingness to protect the agent from public scorn).

- (O) The Krypton-85 (KR-85) *released to the reactor building* during the accident at TMI-2 must be removed . . . [4, p. 1-1].

Like statal passives, dynamic passives, too, interact with agency. The vast majority of dynamic passives occur without the agentive *by*-adjunct.³ Many agents go unexpressed because they are understood through the linguistic or situational context. Moreover the agent is often the experimenter or writer. When the writer is describing his actions, he may choose the passive to avoid repeating the agent in each clause — resulting, otherwise, in a degree of repetition which is stylistically undesirable.⁴

In summarizing the results of the passive data, I think distinguishing between stative and dynamic function proved most important. The statal function of passives allows a writer to describe or attribute qualities to the subject of his sentence without always using the copula as in *Greater access is necessary* with an adjective as subject complement. Furthermore these passives occur frequently, so if the prose of business and technical writing seems “deadly” it is not simply because of an overused passive voice. Rather, business and technical prose suffers from an overuse of copulative verbs and descriptive or attributive subject complements.

Some stylisticians studying business and technical prose advocate an active voice style, realizing agent, action, goal as subject, verb, object [7, pp. 13-19]. However, such advice will not solve this stylistic problem because statal passives do not have corresponding active voice sentences and do not occur with agentive *by*-phrases. Thus, writers can not simply avoid the use of statal passive clauses by translating them into their corresponding active voice clauses: avoiding a passive by translating to the corresponding active will work only with the dynamic uses of passive voice verbs. Instead, what the authors of handbooks and pedagogues need to stress here is using copulative verbs appropriately.

³ See Huddleston [6, pp. 104-108] for a statistical analysis of agentive and agentless passives. The ambiguity between statal and dynamic passive can partially explain the absence of agentive *by*-adjuncts. Statal passives, as mentioned earlier, cannot occur with *by*-adjuncts. So, if statal passives are commonplace in business and technical writing, it follows that large numbers of passive sentences are agentless.

⁴ Thus, the writer may avoid the active voice and the *by*-adjunct of the passive not simply in an attempt at an objective prose style but in his effort to prevent excessive repetition.

THE FUNCTIONS OF NOMINALIZATIONS

The stative/dynamic distinction also explains much about the functions of nominalization in the corpus. Nouns in general may be characterized as stative in that they refer to entities that are regarded as stable. So a normally dynamic item like the verb *submit* in *We are in the midst of submitting our final "operating budget . . . "* can nominalize into the static *submission* in *We are in midst of finalizing our submission for WHN's "operating budget . . . "* [3, p. 111], as if the action were a static "thing."

The most obvious motivation for nominalizing is economy: by converting clauses into noun phrases the underlying proposition reduces to a substantially smaller phrase. The (sometimes) enormous loss of explicitness, since it is possible to delete agentive phrases, increases the brevity of the phrase and thereby expands the amount of information stored in short term memory. As Vendler put it, nominalizations "amount to incorporating a sentence into another *via* a noun-phrase" [8, p. 31]. For example, consider *performance* in (P).

- (P) Without exception, BTNB out performs its city rivals in the rate of return of gross revenues *This performance* extended throughout the time period covered in this report [3, p. 165].

In addition to brevity, (P) shows that nominalizations also serve a cohesive function, cf. [7, pp. 18-19].

Although brevity may be the most obvious function, nominalizations frequently function as *names* which convert verbs describing dynamic processes occurring over various lengths of time into stative nominalizations. Consider the example of two nominalizations (one modifying the other) which function as the concord subject of (Q).

- (Q) Further, *projection of any evaluation* of internal accounting control to future periods is subject to the risk that the procedures may become inadequate . . . [3, p. 198].

Like the stative passives, nominalizations of stative function occur without overt agents. It seems that explicit reference to agents weakens the stative interpretation of the nominalized dynamic verb.

DEVICES WHICH IMPLY AGENCY DESPITE PASSIVE VOICE AND NOMINALIZATIONS

Although business and technical writing frequently loses any explicit mention of agency to the stative reading of nominalized and passive voice verbs, business and technical writing does imply the agent in three ways. First, the agent is usually recoverable from the linguistic or situational context, as in (R).

- (R) The staff concludes that the health and safety of the public will not be endangered by *operation of the system* in the proposed manner . . . [4, p. 1-4].

The reader can readily deduce the system's operator from the context.

Second, modal verbs expressing volition, possibility, necessity, or permission suggest agency, for someone (presumably the writer) believes in the necessity of removing Krypton-85 from the reactor building mentioned in (S).

- (S) The Krypton-85 . . . *must* be removed from the reactor building . . . [4, p. 1-1].

Finally, adverbials which express the writer's viewpoint or attitude also suggest agency, cf. (T).

- (T) Senator Kennedy, who will chair the Antitrust and Monopolies Subcommittee, has expressed particular interest in the Senate bill. *Undoubtedly*, there will be a serious and sustained threat to bring it about . . . [3, p. 146].

The agent who sees the Senate bill as a "serious" threat is not explicit in the clause, but the readers understand that the agent is the writer, through the attitudinal adjunct *undoubtedly*.

SOME CONCLUSIONS FOR TECHNICAL WRITING PEDAGOGY

The functions of passive voice, nominalization and agentless sentences seem more understandable when we consider the stative function of nominalized and passive voice verbs. The stative function of passive voice verbs and nominalizations serve a variety of important functions: cohesion, emphasis, style, prominence, or brevity. And, even though stative passives and nominalizations lack any explicit mention of agency, which is often a source of communicative difficulty in business and technical prose, writers may use other grammatical or contextual devices for recovering or mentioning agency. Therefore, instructors of business and technical writing need not be so quick to condemn passive voice sentences and nominalizations. Instead, instructors and handbook authors should emphasize the use of the best sentence type to fulfill a specific function. The goal of instruction, after all, should not be to limit the choices a writer has; rather, the goal should be to expand the writer's knowledge about the different language structures available to him and their functions.

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NOTE: This article does not discuss *technical* communication specifically, but it does discuss a *functional* approach to language study, the same functional approach used in my *JTWC* article.

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