

- 91% believe that the designation has had a positive impact on their career progression.
- 90% say their CBV designation is recognized in their place of work.
- Almost 80% with a CBV designation say they have no plans to add any additional credentials.
- 70% of CBVs actually identify themselves as senior managers or better in their firms. Almost 40% of respondents are partners or owners of their firms.

Logo Policy

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Writer's Edge

The Virtues of Active Voice

By: Ingrid Sapona, Good with Words

A pail of water from atop the hill was fetched by Jack and Jill.

Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water.

What's the main difference between these sentences? The second is just one word shorter – but it's more interesting because it's in active voice.

When talking about active and passive voice, we're really talking about the subject/verb construction. In active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action. In the first sentence the pail is the subject of the sentence and it was acted upon – it was fetched. In the second sentence Jack and Jill are the subjects of the sentence and they took action – they went up the hill.

Though active voice is always livelier and more interesting, writing in active voice is difficult for many. If you're in that group, the good news is that with practice you can spot sentences you've written in passive voice and, with a bit of practice, you can re-write them in active voice.

A handy rule of thumb for spotting passive voice is to look for:

- some form of “to be”, for example: as, are, is, was, were; *and*
- a past participle, which is usually a verb ending in “ed” or “en”.

Another indication of sentences written in passive voice is they often have a prepositional phrase (typically beginning with “by”) that tells who took the action. Or, if they don’t actually have the prepositional phrase indicating the actor, they leave you wondering who the actor was.

Here’s an example of passive voice I read in a valuation report:

If we had been engaged to express our comprehensive opinion of the fair market value of the shares, additional investigation would have been undertaken and the conclusions may have differed.

This sentence leaves you wondering: (1) who engaged the valuator, and (2) who would have done the additional investigation. I know – you’re thinking the answer to (1) is the client, and the answer to (2) is the valuator. You may be right, but that’s not the only possible interpretation. In any event, active voice would prevent such uncertainty and would make the sentence less boring. Here’s the sentence in active voice:

If you had hired us to give a comprehensive opinion of the fair market value of the shares, we would have done additional investigation and we might have arrived at different conclusions.

Of course, sometimes people intentionally prefer passive voice. If, for example, you want to make a decision seem less personal, passive voice is useful. Here’s an example:

Your application has been reviewed and your request for admission is declined.

Presumably no one wants to claim responsibility for denying admission, so passive voice seems appropriate. But, when you’re hired to provide a valuation, do you really want to hide behind passive voice?

So, here’s the bottom line: using active voice will make your writing more interesting and will decrease the chance of ambiguity creeping in.

As always, I welcome your feedback, questions, and suggestions for topics you’d be interested in reading about. Feel free to drop me a line at: ingrid@goodwithwords.com, or at 416-259-3399.