

Zombies and Vampires

or The Passive and Active Voice

Just like becoming a zombie separates the person from the body, the passive voice separates the actor from the action in a sentence, making sentences unclear and indirect.

The flesh was ripped off her bones.

Who performed the action? Or WHAT performed the action?

The flesh was ripped off her bones by the zombie.

We have all the information we need, but the sentence is still indirect. We need to make the actor the subject of the sentence to show that the zombie *actively* performs the action.

The zombie ripped the flesh off her bones.

We can also think of the passive voice in *to be* phrases. In the above example, "was ripped" signals the passive voice because it couples a version of the word *be* (am, is, were, are, been) with a tensed version of a verb (ending in either -en, -ed, or -ing). Changing the sentence into the active voice follows the process as before, identifying the subject and reorganizing the sentence so the subject directly performs the action. Thinking of the passive voice in *to be* terms can make it easier to identify.

The zombie was gnawing on a decayed leg when the vacantly beautiful vampire crossed its path.

Let's look at the first part of the sentence. While the subject does perform the action, the sentence is still in the passive voice because "was gnawing" follows the *to be* format. Usually eliminating the *be* word and changing the verb into an active tense (such as wrote, went, or flew rather than writing, going, or flying) solves the problem, but here it alters the meaning of the sentence.

The zombie gnawed on a decayed leg when the vacantly beautiful vampire crossed its path.

The new sentence does not show that something interrupted the action. So what do you do? Sometimes you can use the passive voice to convey a message; in this case we want to show that the vampire couple *interrupted* the zombie. You might want to emphasize the distance between the action and the actor. Scientific papers, for example, require the passive voice to make their methods seem more objective, emphasizing the experiment and the data rather than the experimenter. So just the way you write something can change your message!

The stylish and pale vampire was offended by the flesh-eating zombie.

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Created by Jennifer Pitts - October 2010

Let's look at this sentence. Who performed what action? The action *to offend*, is performed by the flesh-eating zombie (the subject). Let's try moving the subject to the beginning of the sentence.

The flesh-eating zombie offended the stylish and pale vampire.

By moving the subject, the flesh-eating zombie, to the beginning of the sentence, we automatically eliminate our *be* verb, *was*. So the passive voice even affects our sentence structure!

I watched as he was turned into a zombie.

Again, we need to know who (or what) performed the action. Or do we? Sometimes you can use the passive voice to convey a message; you might want to emphasize the distance between the actor and the action, as a zombie passively bites its victim rather than choosing who to transform. However, this dull sentence does not say much. Eliminating the passive voice also gives you the opportunity to saturate your writing with *content*. The zombie apocalypse is anything but dull, so we should show how it happened rather than just say that it did.

I watched as his veins darkened through his pallid skin, his posture slowly melting away into the grotesquely disoriented waltz of the undead. I watched as my brother was turned into a zombie.

Now the passive voice actually serves a purpose—it bitterly contrasts my horrific experience with the objective fact that my brother is an anonymous member of the undead.

POINTS TO REMEMBER:

As a vampire stalks his prey, so too does the subject in the active voice perform the action of each sentence.

Like explaining astrophysics to a zombie, reading a paper written entirely in the passive voice is dull, frustrating, and even insulting. Our advice to you—don't insult your audience. They might eat you.