

*Which Comes First,
the Comma or the Pause?*

A Practical Guide to Writing

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Dona J. Young

*Which Comes First, the Comma or the Pause?
A Practical Guide to Writing*

Dona J. Young

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To Charley, Rosie, Robert Lee, and Sophie

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Introduction

Have you ever found yourself reading a sentence over and over again looking for the *right pause*? Oscar Wilde illustrated the confusion about commas and pauses perfectly when he said, “I have spent most of the day putting in a comma and the rest of the day taking it out.”

What about other writing decisions: Do you sometimes find yourself stuck, not being able to get started or say what you mean? How about setting the right tone or getting your readers to respond?

This book covers editing principles in a unique way, integrating grammar with writing style. This book starts with topics that you may think that you should already know, so keep an open mind. You are covering essential concepts at a level of analysis that will empower you to edit like a pro. Trust the process, and you will reap excellent results.

By learning principles, you will no longer guess about where to place commas—or colons or dashes or ellipses, for that matter. Commas, as well as these other marks, are placed based on rules that are rooted in grammar. That is why:

The comma comes first, and the pause follows.

By basing writing decisions on *guesses* rather than solid principles, writing is more difficult than it needs to be. Once you learn principles that give you control of editing decisions, producing effective writing will no longer be a mystery or a struggle.

Here is why this approach works: Improving writing skills is like unrolling a ball of yarn. Principles of one topic are linked to principles of another topic. This book unrolls that ball of yarn for you, *with the sequencing of topics as important as the topics themselves*. To gain maximum benefits, read this book from cover to cover when you are not in an emergency mode seeking an answer.

Also remember that writing is an active, alive process—only by making special effort to apply these principles to your own writing will they become meaningful.

Follow the plan below. In some ways, the plan is foolproof, so do not second-guess yourself or cut corners.

1. *Before you start the first chapter, complete the pre-assessment.*

Go to www.commasrule.com, and take the pre-assessment. Your score will give you a realistic idea of your current skill level and provide a baseline. When you complete the book, take the post-assessment and then compare your results, calculating your percentage of improvement.

2. *Complete the brief exercises that are interspersed throughout each chapter.*

Each chapter presents principles to help you learn core concepts. After each principle, you will find a **Practice** so that you can apply the new principle. The keys are located at the back of the book. Additional exercises are located at www.commasrule.com.

3. *Take the time to do the **Writing Workshop** and the **Editing Workshop**.*

At the end of each chapter, the **Writing Workshop** gives you a somewhat self-reflective topic to journal about. The **Editing Workshop** gives you drafts and revisions: turn them into learning activities by working on the drafts before reviewing the revisions.

4. *Apply the principles to your own writing.*

Learning involves change, and change can be painful. Try new ideas before you decide they will not work, and give yourself time to improve. In general, it takes about a week to become comfortable applying a new principle—but if you do not apply what you are learning, the knowledge will quickly become lost: *if you don't use it, you lose it.*

Before you know it, you will base your writing decisions on solid principles that lead you to a higher standard. As your skills improve, so will your career opportunities. Good luck on your journey: practice makes progress—repetition is key to improving any skill, including writing. *Now go for it!*

Dona Young
February 11, 2009

About This Book

Which Comes First, the Comma or the Pause? takes the mystery out of how to produce correct, clear, simple, and concise writing. Though the title is catchy, this book is meant to build skills rather than to entertain: so if you want to transform your writing skills, expect to roll up your sleeves and get to work. This book will help you develop an effective writing style by helping you to:

- Write correctly and confidently.
- Say what you mean.
- Save time and frustration.
- Gain control of your proofreading and editing skills.
- Communicate more effectively.
- Expand your career opportunities.

At first, some topics may seem basic, but they are the core concepts—the building blocks for your foundation. Revisiting these concepts enables you to fill learning gaps, equipping you to bring your writing to a higher level. So trust the process: you will transform your writing by focusing on the simple, not the complicated.

Read this book from cover to cover and do the exercises. By the time you get to the complex topics, they will seem easy. Each of the chapters should take you an hour or less to complete. Do not take any shortcuts, and the world of editing will open for you, giving you a new lease on writing and the potential it offers your life and career.

In fact, thousands of employees at companies around the country have taken the Writer's Toolkit Trainings on which this book is based: First Chicago - Bank One, ABN Amro - LaSalle Bank, American Dental Association, Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association, Kemper Insurance, and Harris Bank, among others.

As long as you roll up your sleeves and do the work, by the time you finish this book, you will make writing decisions quickly and effectively.

About the Author

Dona Young is a teacher, facilitator, and writing coach. In addition to teaching writing at Indiana University Northwest, she also facilitates writing programs at major corporations around the country.

Young holds a B.A. from Northern Illinois University and an M.A. from The University of Chicago. Young considers herself a lifelong learner, believing that who we become is a result of what we learn. Young is also the author the following books.

The Mechanics of Writing
Writer's Toolkit Publishing, 2008

*Business English:
Writing for the Global Workplace*
McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2008

*Foundations of Business Communication:
An Integrative Approach*
McGraw-Hill/Irwin, 2006

Writing from the Core: A Grammatical Writer
Writer's Toolkit Publishing, Summer 2009

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7

Active Voice

If you find yourself struggling to understand what you are reading, your first thought may be that your reading skills need a tune-up. In fact, the more likely answer is that the writing is full of the passive voice and other complex constructions.

Passive voice complicates meaning because the verb does not create action, which is its prescribed job in a sentence.

- With **active voice**, the verb *performs* action.
- With **passive voice**, the verb *describes* action.

Active voice assists in making writing clear and concise precisely because the various sentence parts play their designated roles. In other words, the verb performs action, and the real subject drives that action. With the passive voice, the real subject is more of a back-seat driver, if it is in the sentence at all. If this analogy does not mean anything to you right now, come back to it after you finish this chapter.

Though active voice is generally the voice of choice, passive voice has a legitimate and necessary place in writing when used purposely. So you might be asking yourself: since active voice is so much more effective, why do people start writing passively in the first place?

Passive voice creeps into people's writing as they progress through the academic system. In other words, you won't find many eighth graders writing in the passive voice, but you will find a lot of college students writing passively. That's partly because many textbooks are written in the passive voice. By graduate school, many writers use the passive voice without question. The same is true of corporate executives, unless the writer has experienced an "intervention."

Once writers start using the passive voice, they struggle to keep it. Because the passive voice becomes more prominent with more education, some writers think that they sound smarter: only smart people can produce complicated writing, right? But the truth is, the eighth grader writing in a crystal clear voice has a superior style to the corporate executive hiding behind layers of abstraction.

As Albert Einstein once said, “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.” In today’s fast-paced world, complicated writing never sounds superior to simple, clear, concise writing. Readers prefer getting to the point quickly so that they can respond and move on.

As you let go of the passive voice, you may need to change the way that you think. Once you make the change to active voice, you will never go back. When you reach that point, you will also see through the style of writers who unknowingly clutch to the passive voice for safety.

Since real subjects play a deciding role in the active voice, let start by reviewing the difference between grammatical subjects and real subjects.

Grammatical Subjects vs. Real Subjects

Real subjects drive the action of verbs; however, as you have already learned, the *grammatical subject* of a sentence is not always its *real subject*.

- The grammatical subject precedes the verb.
- The real subject drives the action of the verb.

When the real subject precedes the verb, the real subject and grammatical subject are one and the same, for example:

Jane’s manager gave her a laptop.

In comparison, in the following sentence, the real subject (manager) is not the grammatical subject (Jane).

Jane was given a laptop by her manager.

Since the real subject appears in the sentence, the above example is considered a **full passive**. In comparison, the following sentence has a grammatical subject, but not a real subject.

A laptop was given to Jane.

Who gave Jane the laptop? Based on the above sentence, we do not know. When a passive sentence does not contain a real subject, it is called a **truncated passive**.

Now let's go over active voice from the beginning.

Active Voice

The active voice is the most clear, direct, and concise way to phrase a sentence because each part of the sentences fills its prescribed role. However, active voice is one of those topics that is better explained through an example than through words.

So let's start with a passive sentence and then learn how to turn it an active one:

Passive: The papers were sent to Sue by Bob.

In the sentence above, first identify the main verb, which is *sent*. Next, identify the real subject by asking who performed the action: *Who sent the papers? Bob did*. Finally, change the order in the sentence so that the real subject (Bob) is also the grammatical subject.

Active: Bob sent the papers to Sue.

Here are detailed steps to change a sentence from passive voice to active voice:

1. Identify the main verb of the sentence.
2. Identify the real subject by asking, *who performed the action of the verb?*
3. Place the real subject at the beginning of the sentence, which is the position of the grammatical subject.
4. Follow the real subject with the verb, adjusting for agreement.
5. Complete the sentence with the rest of the information.

Let's use the above formula to edit another sentence from passive to active voice.

Passive: The merger was rejected by their new CEO.

1. Identify the main verb: Rejected
2. Identify “who” was doing the rejecting: Their new CEO
3. Begin the sentence with the real subject: Their new CEO . . .
4. Follow the real subject with the verb: Their new CEO rejected . . .
5. Complete the sentence: Their new CEO rejected the merger.

Here is the structure for the **active voice**:

Who did what and why.

Here is the structure for the **passive voice**:

What was done by whom and why.

When the real subject is present in a passive sentence, the real subject is in the object position. Can you see that by changing from the passive voice to the active voice that your writing becomes more direct, clear, and concise? Work on the following exercise to practice the active voice.

Practice 7.1

Instructions: Edit the following sentences by changing passive voice to active voice.

1. Sean was asked by his manager to lead the diversity team.
2. Phelps was given another chance by his coach to swim in the relay.
3. The holiday event was hosted by our department last year.
4. A new policy on reimbursement for travel expenses was implemented by our president.
5. The program was cancelled by the mayor due to lack of interest.

Note: The answer key to the above sentences is on page 231.

Passive Voice, the Tactful Voice

Since the real subject does not need to be present in a passive sentence, here are some times when passive voice is preferred over active voice:

- Whenever you do not want to focus on a specific person because it would be more tactful not to “point a finger,” use passive voice, for example:

Passive: A mistake was made on the August invoices.

Who made the mistake? An active sentence needs an actor or agent performing the action of its verb; however, a passive sentence does not need an actor or agent because its verb does not create action.

- Whenever you do not know who performed an action, use passive voice, for example:

Passive: The bank was robbed at gunpoint.

You will find that you use the truncated passive voice naturally in these situations. And, for these situations, the passive voice is not only a necessity, it is an asset. While truncated passives play a vital role in writing, full passives that are used unnecessarily interfere with the quality and flow of writing.

Another element that also complicates writing unnecessarily is the use of nominals. Nominals are often used in conjunction with the passive voice. After you work on the Practice below, you’ll work on getting rid of unnecessary nominals.

Practice 7.2

Instructions: Edit the following sentences by changing passive voice to active voice. Then go back and determine which sentences would sound more tactful written in the passive voice.

1. An error in invoicing was made on the Blackburn Account by Meyers last week.
2. If you wanted to avoid an overdraft, your check should have been deposited before 4 p.m.

3. For us to issue a refund, your receipt should have been enclosed with your return item.
4. Your order was sent to the wrong address and apologies are being made.
5. Your invoice needed to be paid before the first of the month to avoid penalties.

Note: The answer key to the above sentences is on page 232.

Nominals

The word *nominal* refers to words that function as nouns. Would it surprise you to learn that most verbs have the potential to be used as nouns? The actual term for transforming a verb into a noun is *nominalization*.

You've already worked with two forms of nominals: gerunds and infinitives.

- To form a gerund, add *ing* to the base form of a verb: *go* in its gerund form is *going*
- To form an infinitive, add *to* to the base form of a verb, as in *to go*.

As they are nominalized, some verbs change forms completely, following no specific pattern. For example, the verb *analyze* turns into the noun *analysis* . . . the verb *fail* turns into the noun *failure* . . . and the verb *maintain* turns into the noun *maintenance*. Many verbs, however, commonly turn into nouns by adding the suffix *-ment* or *-tion*. Here are some examples:

Verb	Nominal
accomplish	accomplishment
connect	connection
decide	decision
dedicate	dedication
develop	development

encourage	encouragement
evaluate	evaluation
facilitate	facilitation
institute	institutionalization
separate	separation
verify	verification

Obviously, nouns have no action and, for the most part, words originating as nouns cannot become verbs. When people turn nouns into verbs, the construction often sounds awkward, as in “Let’s *lunch* together” or “Do you *lotto*?” One word, however, has taken a unique place in English, and that word is *Google*. *Google* is a proper noun that also functions as a verb. Can you think of any other proper noun that can also function as a verb?

Nominalization changes a verb’s “DNA,” so speak, taking action out of the verb. When writers use nominalizations unnecessarily, their writing becomes more complicated. However, just as passive voice at times adds value, nominalization can also add value when used effectively. And, let’s be honest, isn’t *nominalization* a word that you would rather avoid?

Here is an example of the verb *appreciate* and its nominalized form *appreciation*.

Nominalized: I want to express my **appreciation** for your help.

Active: I **appreciate** your help.

In the nominalized version above, the weak verb *want* replaces the strong verb *appreciate*. As well as stripping *appreciate* of its action, the nominalized version is more wordy. However, at times nominalizations work well, as in the following:

I value your *appreciation*.

Without the nominalization, the same sentiment might be expressed as follows:

When you appreciate my work, I value it.

Here is another example using the verb *commit* and its nominalized form *commitment*:

Nominalized: A **commitment** of resources for the disaster in New Orleans was made by our CEO at the annual meeting.

Active: Our CEO **committed** resources for the disaster in New Orleans at the annual meeting.

Once again, the more complicated writing is, the less effective it is. When using nominals, make sure that you use them purposefully, just as you would use the passive voice purposely.

When writers refuse to give up the passive voice, they may mistakenly believe that they sound sophisticated. Unfortunately, some writers fall into the same trap with nominalizations. Unnecessarily long four-syllable words do not improve the flow of writing. Follow Leonard Da Vinci's advice when he said:

Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.

As an effective writer, make complex messages as *simple* as you can: use nominals *only* when they improve the efficiency of your writing, and use passive voice *only* when it improves the tone of your writing.

Here is one more example that shows how the passive voice and nominalizations are quite naturally used together:

Nominalized: **Encouragement** was given to me by my teammates and coach.

Passive: I **was encouraged** by my teammates and coach.

Active: My teammates and coach **encouraged** me.

The first sentence uses the nominalized form of the verb *encourage*, which is *encouragement*. In the second sentence, the nominal is removed, but the sentence is still passive. In the third sentence, *encourage* is an active verb in its past tense form.

Understanding these principles intellectually is much easier than actually applying to your own writing. To achieve active writing, you need to be open minded and diligent. The more committed you are, the more changes you will make in your writing.

To get some extra practice, do the following exercise.

Practice 7.3

Instructions: Rewrite the following sentences by changing the nominal into an active verb.

Passive: The distribution of the product was made by Mary Lou.

Active: Mary Lou distributed the product.

1. The implementation of the dress policy was made official by management in August.
2. A suggestion was made by Jane that all new hires start on the first day of the month.
3. Information about that stock was given to us by our broker.
4. A discussion of the new account occurred at our last team meeting.
5. An announcement about the merger was made by our president before the deal was final.

Note: The answer key to the above sentences is on page 232.

Style, Tone, and Meaning

One of the biggest arguments against letting go of the passive voice is that changing a sentence from passive voice to active voice changes its meaning.

Shifting from one voice to another does not necessarily change the meaning, but it does change the tone. When all actors are present in a sentence, changing from passive voice to active voice is an exercise in *translation*.

Active voice is direct and clear. Passive voice is indirect and abstract to the point that the person performing the action does not even need to be present:

Passive: The problem will be solved.

Passive: A solution will be developed.

Who is solving the problem? Who is developing a solution? The passive voice allows people to say things without taking responsibility for their actions.

When sentences are long and complicated, the tone of the writing is much different from sentences that are clear and to the point. With passive voice, writers do not connect with their own words in the way that they must with active voice, for example:

Passive: A discussion of the issue ensued at length before an acceptable compromise could be established.

Once again, who discussed the issue? By adding “people” to the mix, the sentence becomes much more friendly.

Active: We discussed the issue at length before we reached a compromise.

Though passive voice sounds more formal, today’s culture no longer supports that distant formality. Change is difficult. Changing your style of writing is difficult. Breaking out of an academic or a corporate mold takes courage, commitment, and vigilance.

Here is a promise: If you start writing in the active voice, your associates will not think less of you. In fact they will not even notice the change unless it is to appreciate your clear, direct writing style that saves them time and energy.

Style and Process

Your writing style will not change overnight. Editing involves focusing on individual sentences and improving their structure. Commit time and energy to applying these principles as you edit, and you will see a striking difference in your writing style.

Even though you now have some good editing tools in your writing toolkit, you still may be trying to get your words down “right” as you compose. The “first and final draft” approach does not work: effective writing takes shape during the editing phase, not the composing phase.

If you try to write “the perfect sentence” as you compose, you are sabotaging your writing. As you write, you need freedom to put ideas on the page in whatever way they take shape in your mind. If you interfere with that process, writing is much more challenging for you than it needs to be.

The next chapter covers parallel structure, another topic that ranks high along with the active voice in making your writing effective.

Recap

Changing from passive voice to active voice improves the quality and readability of writing, but does not necessarily change meaning.

- Active voice is clear, concise, and direct.
- Passive voice is complicated and abstract but perfect for those situations that call for tact.
- Nominalization takes action out of verbs and complicates writing.

If you have been able to identify passive sentences in your own writing and to revise them, savor your sense of accomplishment. Stay vigilant in your quest to write actively: active voice makes writing powerful because it brings writing to life.

Writing Workshop

Activity 7: Lessons Learned

Instructions: What is an important lesson that you have learned? Take out a photo of yourself when you were ten or twenty years younger than you are now. What kinds of advice would you give to that younger and more naïve version of yourself?

Editing Workshop

Draft

Instructions: For the most part, editing passive sentences to the active voice is a matter of translation. Keep that in mind as you edit the following letter. You will find the revision on the next page.

Dear Helen,

Every five years, an update is made on all active accounts by our data processing unit. The procedure is simple. The data on file is sent out to clients such as yourself so that changes can be made with a minimum of inconvenience. Please find enclosed your data form.

As your information is reviewed, any necessary changes should be made and initialized. Once all information has been updated, your signature is needed on the line provided.

Finally, please find enclosed a postage paid, self-addressed envelope so that the updated and signed form can be returned directly to our data processing unit.

Let me convey my appreciation for your prompt attention to this account revision.

Sincerely yours,

Mitchell Szewczyk
Account Executive

Revision

Dear Helen:

Every five years, our data processing unit updates their records on all active accounts. The procedure is simple. We send a current data sheet to clients and then ask them to change any information that is no longer current—your form is enclosed.

- As you review your account information, please initial any changes that you make.
- After you are certain your information is correct, sign the bottom of the form and return it in the enclosed self-addressed envelope.

We value your business and appreciate your prompt attention to this update.

Sincerely,

Mitchell Szewczyk
Account Executive

Notes and Reflections:

In the space below, list two or three points that you have learned in this chapter:

What changes have you made in your writing so far?

Practice 5.2

Rule 2: Semicolon Bridge (BR)

1. Carol suggested the topic; fortunately, Carlos agreed.
2. The project management team offered assistance; however, their time was limited.
3. Ken compiled the data; therefore, Mary crunched it.
4. The numbers turned out* well; as a result, our new budget was accepted.
5. Roger ran in the marathon; unfortunately, he was unable to finish.

* “Turned out” is a verb phrase.

Practice 5.3

Rule 3: Semicolon Because of Commas (BC)

1. (You) Please include Rupert Adams, CEO; Madeline Story, COO; and Mark Coleman, executive president.
2. By next week I will have traveled to St. Louis, Missouri; Chicago, Illinois; and Burlington, Iowa.
3. Mike applied for jobs in Honolulu, Hawaii; Sacramento, California; and Santa Fe, New Mexico.
4. Your application was received yesterday; but when I reviewed it, information was missing.
5. You can resubmit your application today; and since my office will review it, you can call me tomorrow for the results.

CHAPTER 6

Practice 6.1

Regular Verbs in Past Time

1. The coach **misplaced** the roster before the game began.
2. My counselor **suggested** that I submit my resume.
3. Bart **received** the award for most valuable player.
4. Last week, no one on our team **wanted** the schedule to change.
5. When Jonika **suggested** that we meet after school, everyone was pleased.

Practice 6.2

Irregular Verbs in Past Time

1. We **saw** George the other day.
2. He **has done** a great job helping the local food bank.
3. The town council **wrote** (or **has written**) a complimentary letter about him.
4. They **brought** up a good point.
5. Even though his budget **was frozen**, George **lent** them the resources they needed.

Practice 6.3

The –S Form

1. The coach **says** that we need to practice for one more hour.
2. Our team **finishes** in first place every year.
3. Taylor **chooses** the players for both teams.
4. The coach **has** enough good players already.
5. If the group **listens** carefully, they will learn the information.

Practice 6.4

Subjunctive Mood

1. The president insisted that Melba **attend** the reception.
2. Jacob wishes he **were** on this year's team.
3. If Dan **were** your team captain, would you support him?
4. The instructions require that the package **be** sent via UPS.
5. If I **were** you, I would run for office.

CHAPTER 7

Practice 7.1

Changing Passive Voice to Active Voice

1. Sean's manager asked him to lead the diversity team.
2. Phelps' coach gave him another chance to swim in the relay.
3. Our department hosted the holiday event last year.

4. Our president implemented a new policy on reimbursement for travel expenses.
5. The mayor cancelled the program due to lack of interest.

Practice 7.2

Changing Passive Voice to Active Voice/Tactful Preference?

1. Meyers made an error in invoicing the Blackburn Account last week.
For a tactful response, leave the sentence in the in the passive voice and take out the “doer” of the action:
An error in invoicing was made last week on the Blackburn Account.
2. If you wanted to avoid an overdraft, you should have deposited your check before 4 p.m.
Tactful response: leave in the passive voice
3. For us to issue a refund, you should have enclosed your receipt with your return item.
Tactful response: leave in the passive voice
4. We sent your order to the wrong address; we apologize for our mistake.
5. You needed to pay your invoice by the first of the month to avoid penalties.
Tactful response: leave in the passive voice

Practice 7.3

Changing Nominals to Active Verbs

1. Management (officially) implemented the dress policy in August.
2. Jane suggested that all new hires start on the first day of the month.
3. Our broker gave us Information about that stock.
4. We discussed the new account at our last team meeting.
5. Our president announced the merger before the deal was final.

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