

Active and Passive Voice in “Real” Writing

Text #1

Context: UAB President Ray Watts issues a written statement about the decision to end the football program. This statement was released in December of 2014.

Directions: Read the following passage. Pay attention to the speaker’s use of active and passive voice. Underline **three** solid examples of passive voice in the text.

Text:

“I want to thank you for all of your hard work and dedication to our great university. Like you, I love UAB and deeply regret the way our recent process was handled and particularly the way it was announced. The buck stops with me.

In recent days our wonderful community has been divided and trust has been lost. That is the truth and it is now something that requires all of us, over time, working together to repair.

In recent days I have had many meetings with members of our UAB community to express my regret for recent actions, discuss the basis for my decision regarding changes in athletics, but most importantly talk about how we can make sure that we create a process that produces open, constructive dialogue and unity in the future.

To that end I want to take this opportunity to share my thoughts about immediate next steps: I am firmly committed to increasing significantly the involvement of faculty, staff, students, alumni and the community in a series of task forces that will look at future directions for athletics and all of our academic programs. Right now I am identifying key areas where these task forces will be helpful. I will also continue to seek advice from all of these constituencies as we put together a search committee for our new athletic director.

I am planning to convene these task forces before the holiday break but because of exams and other obligations, if that timing does not work, we will begin to meet at the start of the spring semester in early January.

I am sure your meeting this morning will include dialogue that helps us work together to advance these plans for the future. We are all a part of what I consider one of the greatest institutions of higher learning in the world. I love UAB with all of my being and I am totally dedicated to the long term success of this university. While mistakes in the process were made in recent days I ask that you walk with me as we find our way forward. My focus is on the future and the great things we are yet to achieve here at UAB.”

Article about his use of passive voice: http://www.al.com/opinion/index.ssf/2014/12/elements_of_guile_ray_watts_te.html

Reflection Questions:

1. Why would Watts use passive voice in those three instances?
2. So... why do writers sometimes use passive voice *on purpose*?

Text 2:

Context: This excerpt is from MLK Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech. This speech was delivered on August 28, 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C.

Directions: Read the following excerpt. Pay attention to the speaker's use of active and passive voice. After you read, look closely at the two bolded paragraphs. One is written in active voice; one is written in passive voice. Label them in the margins as "A" or "P." Then, underline the **clause** that is repeated throughout the speech. Label it as "A" or "P" as well.

Text: "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a *dream* today!

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of "interposition" and "nullification" -- one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a *dream* today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."

This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with.

With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."

Reflection Questions:

1. What effect does MLK, Jr. achieve by using active voice in some parts of his speech?
2. What effect does MLK, Jr. achieve by using passive voice in some parts of his speech?
3. So...why do writers sometimes use passive voice *on purpose*? Active voice?