

TOOL 3



Activate your verbs.

*Strong verbs create action,
save words, and reveal the players.*

President John F. Kennedy testified that a favorite book was *From Russia with Love*, the 1957 James Bond adventure by Ian Fleming. This choice revealed more about JFK than we knew at the time and created a cult of 007 that persists to this day.

The power of Fleming's prose flows from active verbs. In sentence after sentence, page after page, England's favorite secret agent, or his beautiful companion, or his villainous adversary, performs the action of the verb (the emphasis is mine):

Bond *climbed* the few stairs and *unlocked* his door and *locked* and *bolted* it behind him. Moonlight *filtered* through the curtains. He *walked* across and *turned* on the pink-shaded lights on the dressing-table. He *stripped* off his clothes and *went* into the bathroom and *stood* for a few minutes under the shower. . . . He *cleaned* his teeth and *gargled* with a sharp mouthwash to get rid of the taste of the day and *turned* off the bathroom light and *went* back into the bedroom. . . .

Bond *gave* a shuddering yawn. He *let* the curtains drop back into place. He *bent* to switch off the lights on the dressing-table. Suddenly he *stiffened* and his heart *missed* a beat.

There had been a nervous giggle from the shadows at the back of the room. A girl's voice *said*, "Poor Mister Bond. You must be tired. Come to bed."

In writing this passage, Fleming followed the advice of his countryman George Orwell, who wrote of verbs: "Never use the passive where you can use the active."

I learned the distinction between active and passive voice as early as fifth grade. Thank you, Sister Katherine William. I failed to learn, until much later, why that distinction mattered. But let me first correct a popular misconception. The voice of verbs (active or passive) has nothing to do with the tense of verbs. Writers sometimes ask, "Is it ever OK to write in the passive tense?" *Tense* defines action within time — *when* the verb happens — the present, past, or future. *Voice* defines the relationship between subject and verb — who does what.

- If the subject performs the action of the verb, we call the verb *active*.
- If the subject receives the action of the verb, we call the verb *passive*.
- A verb that is neither active nor passive is a *linking verb*, a form of the verb *to be*.

All verbs, in any tense, fit into one of those three baskets.

News writers reach often for the simple active verb. Consider this *New York Times* lead by Carlotta Gall on the suicidal desperation of Afghan women:

Waiflike, draped in a pale blue veil, Madina, 20, *sits* on her hospital bed, bandages covering the terrible, raw burns on her neck and chest. Her hands *tremble*. She *picks* nervously at the soles of her feet and confesses that three months earlier she *set* herself on fire with kerosene.

Both Fleming and Gall use active verbs to power their narratives, but notice an important difference between them. While Fleming uses the past tense to narrate his adventure, Gall prefers the present. This strategy immerses readers in the immediacy of experience, as if we were sitting — right now — beside the poor woman in her grief.

Both Fleming and Gall avoid verb qualifiers that attach themselves to standard prose like barnacles to the hull of a ship:

sort of	seemed to
tend to	could have
kind of	used to
must have	begin to

Scrape away these crustaceans during revision, and the ship of your prose will glide toward meaning with speed and grace.

The earnest writer can overuse a writing tool. If you shoot up your verbs with steroids, you risk creating an effect that poet Donald Hall derides as “false color,” the stuff of adventure magazines and romance novels. Temperance controls the impulse to overwrite.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, novelist Amy Tan exercises exquisite control, using strong verbs to depict the authentic color of emotional truth:

And in my memory I can still *feel* the hope that *beat* in me that night. I *clung* to this hope, day after day, night after night, year after year. I would *watch* my mother lying in her bed, babbling to herself as she *sat* on the sofa. And yet I *knew* that this, the worst possible thing, would one day *stop*. I still *saw* bad things in my mind, but now I *found* ways to change them. I still *heard* Mrs. Sorci and Teresa having terrible fights, but I *saw* something else. . . . I *saw* a girl complaining that the pain of not being seen was unbearable.

Ian Fleming's verbs describe external action and adventure; Amy Tan's verbs capture internal action and emotion. But action can also be intellectual, in the force and power of an argument, as Albert Camus demonstrates in *The Rebel*:

The metaphysical rebel *protests* against the condition in which he *finds* himself as a man. The rebel slave *affirms* that there is something in him that will not *tolerate* the manner in which his master *treats* him; the metaphysical rebel *declares* that he is frustrated by the universe.

Notice that even with all the active verbs in that passage, Camus does not pass on the passive when he needs it (“he is frustrated”), which brings us to the next tool.

WORKSHOP

1. Verbs fall into three categories: active, passive, and forms of the verb *to be*. Review your writing and circle verb forms with a pencil. In the margins, categorize each verb.
2. Convert passive and *to be* verbs into the active. For example, “It was her observation that” can become “She observed.”
3. In your own work and in the newspaper, search for verb qualifiers and see what happens when you cut them.
4. Experiment with both voice and tense. Find a passage you have written in the active voice and in the past tense. Change the verbs to the present tense and consider the effect. Does it seem more immediate?
5. I described three uses of the active voice: to create outward action, to express inner or emotional action, and to energize an argument. Look for examples of all three in your reading and for opportunities to use them in your writing.