

Learning to Love Passive Construction

By Carolyn Howard-Johnson, author of *The Frugal Editor*

Writers of fiction, and nonfiction for that matter, are told to avoid passive sentences for a variety of reasons. After all, they tend to tug on the forward momentum we are usually after. But passive construction can be used effectively, too. Like all love, we need to accept passives, try to utilize what they're good at and, at the same time, recognize their flaws and make an effort not to let them into our lives.

A good editor may help you avoid passive constructions by suggesting changes that will make them active. Try doing it yourself with the three examples below.

1. "I was offended by the President's proclamation."
2. "Catherine was being watched."
3. "Catherine was being silly."

Here is your cheat sheet:

For the first example you would, of course, make it "The President's proclamation offended me."

For the second, you'll have to provide the intended subject. It might look like this:

"The fuzz watched Catherine."
(So, maybe you'd be more formal (-: and call them "coppers!")).

The third example might throw you a curve.

That's because it isn't a passive sentence. Here's the thing. We tend to assume a construction is passive when we see helper verbs and "ing" words. But these are not always passive indicators. That's one more thing for you to figure out in addition to deciding whether you want to avoid a passive construction anyway.

There are reasons to love the passive. I mean, language develops out of need (among other things). So we sometimes need the passive and when we do, and recognize why we do, we can grow to love it. Here are reasons you might want to intentionally use passive verbs:

1. You want to slow down the movement in a saga set in the 19th century
2. You're using passive construction as part of a speech pattern used by a particular character.
3. You're writing political copy and you want to avoid pointing a finger at, say, the FBI because you don't want to get put on the dreaded US No-Fly list. So instead of saying "The FBI is watching Carolyn." You say, "Carolyn is being watched." No blame that way.

We need to know not only how to make verbs active and when to leave them alone, and, yep, when to use them to our advantage. That way we can learn to love them.

Carolyn Howard-Johnson's first novel, *This Is the Place*, won eight awards and uses the passive voice liberally because it is set in a slower time, a different culture. An instructor for UCLA Extension's world-renown Writers' Program, her book *The Frugal Book Promoter: How to Do What Your Publisher Won't* is recommended reading for her classes, and was named USA Book News' "Best Professional Book." It is also an Irwin Award winner. Her second book in the *How To Do It Frugally* series is *The Frugal Editor: Put Your Best Book Forward to Avoid Humiliation and Ensure Success* is also a USA Book News award-winner as well as the winner of the Reader View's Literary Award in the publishing category. She is the recipient of both the California Legislature's Woman of the Year in Arts and Entertainment Award. She is a popular speaker and actor. Her website is www.HowToDoltFrugally.com.