



The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

Power Up Your Prose By Eliminating Passive Voice

By Bret Funk

Any discussion of weak writing should start with passive voice. It should also end with passive voice, with passive voice mentioned several times throughout. New writers tend to use it to excess, but even seasoned wordsmiths find it creeping into their prose. Controlling weak writing requires constant vigilance, infinite patience, and flexibility of style, and to understand the nuances of passive voice, an author must make the greatest sacrifice of all: he must delve into the hated world of grammar texts and style books, and then apply those onerous rules to his own writing.

In my last article I touched on the reasons passivity has invaded our writing, but the why of it is not all that important. The fact that it weakens writing and the pervasiveness it has in our culture are far more serious matters. The more we allow it to insinuate into our prose,

especially during the early, formative phases of our development, the harder it becomes to root out. Passive writing is like any other bad habit: easy to get into, hard to get out of.

What, exactly, is passive voice? Passive voice is an inversion of the normal subject/verb order. It places emphasis on the object and the action, rather than the subject. Look at the following examples:

The hobbit stole the food.
The food was stolen.

In the first sentence, the subject performs an action on the object; in the second sentence, not only is the object more important, but the subject disappears altogether. The action is passive... It isn't happening; it already happened.

Should passive voice ever be used? Certainly, situations exist where passive voice may be used to proper effect. Passive voice has a time-honored tradition in fiction as a method of creating suspense. *The book was stolen! Who did it? Will we ever find out?* It also is a convenient tool to use when the "subject" of your sentence is incapable of creating its own action. *The body was dragged across the room* is an acceptable wording, particularly if the body is the most important thing in regards to the narrative. However, since we know the body can't be dragging itself, it's safe to assume that something is dragging it, so where's the harm in mentioning it (eliminating the passive voice altogether and strengthening the power of your prose).

Bill and Ted dragged the body across the floor.

This imparts the same meaning to the reader, but now a definite subject (two, actually) performs the action.

Similarly, if a wine glass is overturned, and you are more concerned with the glass and its contents, you could write: *The wine glass was knocked over, and the wine was spilled.* If the perpetrator of this heinous crime is important, you could instead write: *Bob knocked the wineglass over with his flailing arms and spilled wine on the new carpet.*

For the above example, if the action occurs while the narrator is in the room, there is no good reason to use passive voice over active. It adds far more strength to the scene to have Bob actually knock the glass over for the reader than it does to tell the reader that the glass was

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Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End

by Erik Goodwyn

The last Pirate's movie I praised, as it raised the "popcorn" movie to a high level of enjoyability. There was action, humor, romance (sort of), and lots of weird stuff. But this movie is something else. What, you ask? Consider the other reviewer's opinions so far. Consider how some have called it "overblown", "overlong", "overboard", not to mention "confusing", "half baked", and lots of other negative expletives. Consider that I've seen it twice already and plan to see it again. Are the other reviewers wrong? In all honesty, I don't know, and I don't care, because *here there be pirates! The nay-sayers be damned for a bunch of insolent sea dogs and feckless blaggards!*

Ahem. I'll try to contain myself. The point is that yes, *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* is overstuffed with characters, zany ideas, zany humor, utterly ludicrous situations, not to mention entirely too many explosions. It all goes on just a little bit too long, and the characters are in general quite hastily drawn. But these are quibbles, and especially since they applied to the previous two movies, I say you know what you are getting into by the time you sit down with a tub of popcorn for the third outing. The question is, does it entertain? The answer is most definitely a hearty "yes" (or "yo-ho", as it were).

The film has lots to love. The filmmakers have expanded the universe for these stories, taking us into wierd worlds and letting us wallow in them for a while, rather than hastily zipping in and out of them like lesser movies might. They also had the good sense to let themselves run wild, letting their imaginations soar to new heights, then had the audacity to put it all on screen: the end battle is one of truly colossal proportions, and in fact the entire movie is on a grander scale than the previous outings, and as such it raises the bar yet again. The period detail is excellent, even if they get carried away by covering everyone in grime and scars and ripped up clothes, and the set design is, again, fantastic--every scene is dripping (sometimes literally) with detail.

Everything you might expect from the previous films is here. Fantastical creatures abound, old

friends and enemies have returned, and there is still plenty of humor--not to mention a wedding scene unlike any you've ever witnessed. What I wasn't expecting was something even more than just straightforward action-movie adrenaline. There is a dark whimsy about it all that hearkens back to older, more primal stories that is too often missing in our digital-glazed, now-obsessed, and high-speed superficial world. Perhaps the writers took a look at some original pirate tales, or fairy tales for that matter, and drew inspiration from them. What I noticed is that if one is able or willing to look past all of the spectacular explosions, the delightfully confusing back-stabbing plot, and the hilarious zaniness of it all, which are more than enough to enjoy the movie anyway, you might find some deeper treasures in these waters than meets the eye.

And don't expect a predictable ending either. Knowing that the sheer power of likable characters can only go so far, the filmmakers have rached the tension level by giving them some tough choices to make, and not everything is tied up neatly at the end. That would be unjust to the characters, and they seemed to know this. Is this the last Pirates movie? Let's just say with all cynical comments about profitability and the Disney corporate juggernaut aside, it's still wide open. If they do make more, and I think we all know what will decide that, I'll still be first in line to see the next one.

A simplified definition would be that the author of a "straight" science fiction story proceeds from (or alleges to proceed from) known facts, developed in a credible way.

— Sam J. Lundwall

The USF Student Body is diverse—culture within culture. Where I live in Arizona, activities are sporadic and generally under-publicized. Socially speaking, USF students in the Southwest gather in mini-societies just under the radar. Larger cities have Cons and more organization, but rural fandom gatherings are informal and infrequent. Statistics indicate there are “sci-fi” people like me out there (here), yet fandom (fen) seem reluctant to venture far from home. I know there are retired USF faculty members in my area—actors and writers—but for now, I’m flying solo in search of the elusive Student Body.

Already aware that the terms defining science fiction have changed drastically in just the last five years—sci-fi, SF, speculative fiction—and all the genres that now stick close to these labels—horror, hard science fiction, comics, rpg, fantasy—are sticking close, finding classmates who like the same thing I like is a challenge. I’m often online cruising websites and Ezines for people to communicate with—which was how I found my dear and patient Editor, Bret Funk and Tyrannosaurus Press. Because my interests are more main-stream-old-school, it’s been relatively easy to send out a quick and dirty Email asking questions about sci-fi or writing or a certain show to potential buddies and usually get good response. Only twice have I received the eerie feeling a thug lurks on the other end of cyberspace hoping for a tweet. As a result from being the initiator, the reward of having Email classmates worldwide allows a certain comfortable camaraderie that I am not alone in my sci-fi passion—and I can stay in my pajamas.

For this gal, enjoying science/speculative fiction is a group experience at its finest or simply a communication exercise, if nothing more. Alone in a bubble, with only my own wonderful, but possibly narrow, thoughts is a horrific concept. Sharing the experience is part of the joy, even if my classmates disagree or debate minutia.

Cyberspace, however, has limits. Interpreting body language and voice inflection can lead to misunderstanding. I’ve ticked off a couple e-pals

with a response to something they find precious or essential because of missed social cues that just don’t translate to text. Luckily, I’m quickly forgiven and we go on and gossip during class—trading cyber playing cards, stats, and text. Yet, teleclass isn’t the same as a warm body yakking away in some dim diner at 3 in the morning discussing the finer points of being a Game Master for role-playing games. I miss the human element—the essential element, for in actuality, without other mostly-water-entities, what is the point of speculation in the first place? And, I’ll own this, who do I share this new concept or knowledge or experience with? My Higher Power? A tree? The dog? I need a connection to remind me my conclusions (and yours) are valid. You feed me; I feed you. Win-win. I need fandom and that’s all there is to it.

Not that I want to be codependent about my sci-fi education, but feedback helps refine what is good and true about an issue, *in general*. Feedback, giving and taking, confine and define the whole experience. Without parameters to know how others think or feel about an issue (fielding and filtering their sometimes dominating views), how can I know what I think?

That doesn’t sound as lame as it looks. If I think the sky is red and you tell me it’s blue but you can’t explain scientifically why it’s blue, and enough people don’t come along and verify that it’s blue, I will be in error. Not that it’s a big deal if I bumble through life believing wrong information, but some issues are important, like deciding that driving on the wrong side of the road is perfectly okay. Without rocking and rolling around fandom, I have only my own best thinking to deal with. And as many AA people can testify, our own best thinking has gotten us in trouble.

So the need for human contact and connection is part of the enjoyment of sci-fi fandom. I need to learn to disagree without being disagreeable, and weathering the social aspects that allow this to occur. It can happen in electronic-land, but I prefer the mistake making, sometimes socially inept over being chained to the straight-ahead,

Fraction of Planets Having Intelligent Life

by Joe Vadalma

Planets bearing life could be fairly common in the Milky Way Galaxy. But, how many of these planets contain intelligent life? By intelligent life, I mean an animal with enough intelligence to gaze up into the cosmos and wonder what it all means. On earth, it took 3.5 billion years for the early life forms to evolve into us. That's a long time. Many things could have happened that would prevent evolution from going in the direction of intelligence. For example, it is now believed that the dinosaurs were wiped out when a giant meteor crashed into earth and killed ninety percent of the existing species. Suppose that had not happened. It is possible that dinosaurs would rule the earth today. Would a species of dinosaur or some animal evolved from dinosaurs have developed intelligence to the degree of human beings? Possibly, but maybe not. Flip a coin.

Most theories of the evolution of intelligence are based on the presumption that increased intelligence has been actively selected for over evolutionary time. This appears to be true. The earliest unicellular organisms on Earth did not possess nervous systems. The first multicelled animals (metazoans) developed simple nervous systems about 560 million years ago. More recent groups, such as vertebrates, have larger brains and suggested a trend. Consistent with this pattern is that the most brainy animal, modern *Homo Sapiens*, arose only 500,000 years ago.

The evidence indicates that both maximum and mean intelligence has risen over the history of life on Earth. However, two types of mechanisms could account for this pattern. If earlier organisms arose near a lower limit on brain size, as diversity increased, mean brain size could only increase along with it. Its mechanism is a passive trend, because it does not imply any active selection for increased intelligence. In contrast, an active or driven trend would involve an upward tendency toward increasingly higher intelligent levels induced by natural selection.

If trends in intelligence are driven, fewer intelligent species will evolve into more intelligent species more frequently at a faster rate than

otherwise. Therefore, the expected number of highly intelligent species at any given time will be greater than if no such tendency existed. Further, larger numbers of highly intelligent species increases the probability that at least one such species will survive extinction. In other words, that intelligent life will be continuously present somewhere.

The big question from our standpoint is where. Take our galaxy for example. It is a spiral with a diameter of 80,000 to 100,000 light years. Our solar system is roughly 26,000 light years from galactic center. This means that most star systems are several thousand lightyears away. Let's say that an intelligent technological species were to broadcast a signal from a system 10,000 light years away. By the time we received the signal, ten thousand years would have gone by on their planet. A lot can happen in ten thousand years.

If we would send a signal back to them, twenty thousand years would have gone by for them by the time they received it and ten thousand on earth. As you can see, communication between alien societies is highly unlikely unless they are relatively close, less than a hundred lightyears away.

My conclusion from this is that there may be thousands of intelligent beings out there, but will we ever hear from them? I doubt it.

The most important things are the hardest things to say. They are the things you get ashamed of because words diminish your feelings - words shrink things that seem timeless when they are in your head to no more than living size when they are brought out.

— Stephen King

The Writer's Block: Quick vs. Slow Suspense

by Charles Gramlich

Suspense is an element in all fiction. Suspense is what keeps readers reading, keeps them turning the pages, no matter what the genre. Suspense is wanting to know what happens next, whether to see if the world will be saved, or just if the hero and heroine will get together. When the suspense is generated by the threat of vampires, monsters, serial killers and other "creatures of the night" it is usually called "Dark Suspense," and that's the kind I'm personally most interested in. This kind of suspense is based on *fear*, either of the unknown, or perhaps of something that is known only too well.

Because we are all so constantly bombarded with over-the-top suspense in entertainment, as in movies from the current crop all the way to old favorites such as *Alien*, *Predator*, *Dracula*, and *Die Hard*, modern folks have become somewhat blasé about "entertainment" suspense. That has made it increasingly hard to induce this critical emotion, not only in movies but in writing as well.

A writer who is about twenty years older than me told me once that when he saw the original version of "The Thing," an old Science Fiction horror movie from the fifties, he literally wet his pants when the monster appeared on the screen. He was young when he saw it, but about twenty years later, when I was about the same age, I saw the same movie myself for the first time. All I could think of was that the monster looked like a giant walking carrot. It was not scary. By then I'd seen much worse on screens large and small.

The ante has been raised for modern writers and filmmakers. The need for suspense is greater than ever, and it's harder than ever to do it effectively. That means we have to think carefully before we commit anything to paper. We have to analyze how suspense works and how to create it. This article will look at only one small piece of the puzzle, the difference between *Quick* and *Slow* suspense. It's something that writers need to keep in mind as they spin their tales.

Every novel needs *Slow* suspense. Thriller and horror tales need a lot of the *Quick* kind as well. Depending on their length, short stories can have very little to a lot of *Slow* suspense, but they definitely must have some of the *Quick* kind. Any written work can probably benefit from a mixture of the two, but *Slow* suspense is clearly superior and much harder to create. It has to develop as the storyline develops. Let's talk about the easier kind, the *Quick* kind, first.

Here's an opening piece from Joe Lansdale's story "The Steel Valentine."

"A man did not club you unconscious, bring you to his estate and tie you to a chair in an empty storage shed out back of the place if he merely intended to give you a valentine."

Here's the opening from Lansdale's book *The Nightrunners*.

"Midnight. Black as the heart of Satan. They came rolling out of the darkness in a black '66 Chevy; eating up Highway 59 North..."

Here's the beginning to Peter Straub's *Ghost Story*, a masterpiece of suspense.

"Because he thought that he would have problems taking the child over the border into Canada, he drove south, skirting the cities whenever they came and taking the anonymous freeways..."

In these examples there is little or no characterization. There's been no time for it. Instead, there is scene setting and action, and threat. But it's enough to create both a mood and an initial curiosity in the reader, which is the primary function of *Quick* suspense. In a short story these two things might keep the reader hooked all the way through, as long as the scenes remain interesting and the action rockets along. In a *very* short story you'll have time for little else. I've written quite a few tales under 3,000 words and developing *Slow* suspense at such a length is virtually impossible. The suspense has to be there from the start.

Although *Quick* suspense is important in a novel as well as short stories, especially at the beginning, it simply cannot carry an entire book. You need *Slow* suspense too, and *Slow* suspense

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Reviews

Key to Conflict

Talia Gryphon

Ace, Jun 2007

\$7.99

ISBN: 0441015034

Review by Harriet Klausner

Marine Corps Special Ops Captain Gillian Key is a Paramortal psychologist who uses her black ops training when called upon by her superiors. Currently, she is in Romania at the request of the Master Vampire Count Aleksei Rachlav, who needs her help with depression and fangxiety. She is also working with a six century old ghost who haunts a Bed and Breakfast. Finally Gillian is on a solo military mission.

Dracula has returned and is making his presence felt as he believes, unlike the vampire lines of Osiris and Dionysius, that humans are meals or slaves. The Count has gathered a powerful army of vampires and other paranormal species. He intends to use his minions to destroy his enemies amidst his peers like Aleksei before conquering humanity. Gillian, caught in the middle of the upcoming war finds herself caring for Aleksei who is falling in love with the ops shrink. Both intend to be warriors in the fight to kill Dracula and keep the Paramortal-human treaty alive.

Urban fantasy readers will welcome Talia Gryphon, whose thriller will appeal to fans of Charlaine Harris and Kelly Armstrong. The heroine, at first glance, seems like a weak human to her kind and to ancient immortals, but she is a petite dynamo who proves she is mentally and physically strong. She leads the audience to admire her pluck, skills, and courage. She fears love and keeps her relationships on a distant plateau, although Aleksei may prove to be her match as he keeps creeping closer to her heart. Four centuries of life has taught the hero that the *Key To Conflict* or for that matter, living, is adapting old world customs to female equality.

Magic Lost, Trouble Found

Lisa Shearin

Ace, June 2007

\$7.99, Mass Market 352 pgs.

ISBN 0441015050

Review by Harriet Klausner

The City of Mermeia is divided into districts; each one is home to a different race including elves, goblins, dwarves, humans and sorcerers. Mage practitioners are common; Raine Benares, an elf, is a mid-level practitioner who earns her living by seeking lost objects and sometimes people for her clients. Her life changes dramatically when she watches over her friend when he breaks into the house of a powerful necromancer to steal an artifact.

Two sets of goblin warriors, one loyal to the king and a group loyal to the exiled prince want the artifact Raine took. Raine creates a diversion and they escape. Raine puts the artifact around her neck and finds she can't take it off or it will kill her. It has powerful magic that enhances her own power and gives her new ones but the price is too high. The goblin king, his sadistic advisor Sarad Nupana and Prince Chigau want the one who wears the artifact because it will lead them to Saghred a weapon of mass destruction. Raine has to find a way to keep it out of evil's hands, find a way to remove the artifact and give it to somebody without getting killed.

This is wonderful fantasy tale full of different races and myths and legends who are drawn so perfectly, readers will believe they actually exist. Raine is a strong female, a leader who wants to do the right thing even when she isn't sure what that is. She has an elf and a human interested in her and it is fun watching them compete trying to get her interested in them in between near death escapades. Lisa Shearin has the magic touch (keyboard) when it comes to writing good fantasy.

USF (con't)

heads-up square I look at hoping for community. So, how do I find fandom? How do I find you?

I've resorted to two methods: advertising on the net (threatening to have my email address embroidered on my jacket and painted on the back window of my car) and asking everyone I meet for the first time if they like science fiction. The asking part produces unusual responses, everything from the stunned penguin look as they back away to the discovery of a family who recently moved to the area who like a lot of things I like. Score! Unfortunately, while it was an incredible 5-way conversation, we didn't connect enough to exchange phone numbers or plan to see the next SF flick together. Undaunted, mostly, I keep mining for fandom gold.

In my travels, I've met and played with the flamboyant and histrionic to the wounded and socially phobic personality. I do not speak for all of fandom. I am a student of the social creature and my findings are anecdotal rather than researched. Give me a live body, when possible, but at least give me smoke signals. Leave me alone and I wither in the sci-fi desert. I need the Student Body as much as I need to stoke the fires of my science fiction passion. May we inadvertently jostle each other in the student lounge, and as we bump our heads picking up the contents of our backpacks, maybe we'll find a lot in common?

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Passive Voice (con't)

knocked over. Even if the narrator arrives after the deed, though, more active descriptions should be employed. *Everyone sat in their places, prim and proper, but the wineglass lay on its side and the steady drip, drip, drip of the blood red wine as it puddled on the carpet drove Bob insane like the steady beating of a telltale heart.*

Far too often, authors trap themselves in a passive mind frame and believe weak constructions are required to describe the scene in question. This is almost never the case. Active wording can be employed in virtually any scenario, and with far better success, than passive wording. Unfortunately, active re-wording requires thought,

industriousness, and an openness to revision, three virtues our culture is doing its best to eliminate from society.

The only remaining question is how one knows when to use passive voice, and when to use active. There's no correct answer, though as a guideline I would suggest using passive voice only when forced to. If an active alternative exists, it is likely the better choice. For the truly diligent, I recommend the following exercise: Write both forms out and juxtapose them. Read the sentences (or paragraphs) several times and determine which of the two make for a more compelling read.

If writing is weakened by passive voice, it is hampered in its ability to impress. Add power to your writing, and readers will beg for more.

Suspense (con't)

develops primarily from characters. Most readers will agree that the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy starts off pretty slowly. It begins with a birthday party, for goodness sake. Not much *Quick* suspense there. But by the time Frodo and Sam sneak into Mordor to destroy the one ring, readers are frantic with worry because they've come to respect and love the two hobbits.

It has probably always been hard to create characters that readers care about, and I don't think that TV and movies have hurt that process as much as they've hurt the writers' ability to develop *Quick* suspense. When people fall in love with characters any threat to that character will create suspense.

Since I've written about the process of developing characters before in this column, I'm not going to cover those details again here and will refer you to those previous essays, which can be found in the archives at the *The Illuminata* website. These are: "Creating Sympathetic Characters" in the August, 2003 *Illuminata* (p. 4), and "Characters: The Best and the Rest" from the February, 2007 issue (p. 3, 10). Putting a beloved character in danger is the secret to *Slow* suspense, and to keeping a reader hooked through the pages.