



Twin Cities Professional Editors Network

NETWORKING NEWS

NOVEMBER 2004

www.pensite.org

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

November 9, 2004

1:00–3:00 P.M.

Merriam Park Public Library
1831 Marshall Avenue
St. Paul

Topic

Contracts and Invoices

Three panelists: David W. Koehser, attorney and member of Minnesota Book Publishers' Roundtable; Jane Norling, PEN member and owner of KMT Communications; Jessica Thoreson, managing editor, Augsburg Fortress Publishers

Directions

Take I-94 to the Snelling Avenue exit. Go south on Snelling for three blocks. Turn right on Marshall Avenue. Follow Marshall Avenue about six blocks to Fairview Avenue. The library is on your right at the intersection of Marshall and Fairview. The library has a small parking lot; if it is full, look for parking on Marshall Avenue or side streets.

LOOKING AHEAD

December 14, 2004

6:30–8:30 P.M.

Topic

Holiday Party!

Location

Kate Havelin's house
2028 Ashland Avenue
St. Paul

ACTIVE VOICE: NOT JUST FOR NOVELS ANYMORE

GUEST COLUMN – VICTORIA TIRREL

At a picnic this summer, a neighbor (and fellow word geek) mentioned she always uses active voice when she writes at the office because it enables her to take greater ownership of her work plan. We were a bunch of talented, professional people—at least a couple of PhDs in the bunch—but her comment brought a look of confusion to more than one face. On went my “Super Editor” cape as I launched for the umpteenth time into the tale of active versus passive voice.

It's hard to define active voice without explaining passive voice first. “Mistakes were made,” is an often-heard passive voice sentence; another is “a man was killed.” (I often think of passive voice as the hallmark of politicians and teenagers after their first car accident.) The active voice versions are “I made mistakes” and “the robber killed the man.”

Now the light bulbs go on. Eureka! In passive voice, no particular person appears to be responsible for the mistakes or the killing—we have a mystery on our hands. But change the sentence to active voice, and the do-er is identified.

Suddenly, responsibility is claimed!

Books for fiction writers warn against using passive voice, but business and academic writing also can benefit from increased awareness. When I root out passive voice in my clients' writing, I'm helping them unleash the power that active voice provides.



Not that passive voice is always bad; it can be a powerful weapon in your writing arsenal if used sparingly. In fiction, for instance, dialogue written in passive voice is characterization. And in other writing, sometimes focusing on the do-er isn't where the emphasis belongs—“President Kennedy was shot today” is a completely appropriate use of passive voice. Aim for active voice in 95 percent of your writing and save the remaining five percent for targeted and devastating use of its counterpart.

Not sure how frequently you or your clients use passive voice? Change your spelling and grammar settings to check for sentence passivity; you might be surprised.