

# How to write more better

**IN MY MANY YEARS AS A WRITER AND** an editor, the number one objection I get from people when I ask them to send in something for a newsletter or magazine is, “But I’m not a good writer!”

I stifle the urge to correct them (“My apologies, sir or madam; I fear you mean you do not write well.”) and insist that if they can speak well enough to get their idea across, then they can, indeed, write just fine.

The *Owners News* relies on MOA members for a lot of content, and I think that assumption many have that they don’t write well keeps a lot of folks from sending in their travel stories, dealer profiles, product/book/film reviews, First Bike stories, and touring tips. Hopefully this column will help encourage more readers to become writers!

There are a lot of ways to fool people into thinking you write better than you think you do, and I’m here to show you some of those ways. Over the course of this series, I’ll reveal to you some pitfalls of writing, how to identify them in your own writing, and most importantly, how to correct them

without sacrificing your unique voice and point of view.

For this first column, let’s tackle passive sentences. Eliminating passive sentences from your writing is a good place to start improving, because it’s one of the easier things to identify and just as easy to fix.

We all remember from early grade school that the most basic sentences have two parts – the subject, which contains the primary noun, and the predicate, which contains the verb and tells us what the subject is doing. If you don’t recall this, I’ll help you by quoting the *Schoolhouse Rock!* classic, “The Tale of Mr. Morton”:

“Mr. Morton is the subject of the sentence And what the predicate says, he does.”

That says it all. The simplest sentence has a clear, identifiable subject followed by a concise, action-filled predicate: **Wes rides.**

Bam! The subject (Wes) and the action (rides) are both clear. Let’s spice up that sentence a little, though, so we have something to work with: **Wes rode his R 1200 GS to the rally.**

That’s still a nice, active sentence, so we

need to rearrange it a bit to show what passive writing looks like: **The R 1200 GS was ridden to the rally.**

One of the things that can make passive writing difficult to identify is that many passive sentences look correct; technically, they *are* grammatically correct. The problem is they’re not always interesting. In the above example, “R 1200 GS” looks like it is the subject. It isn’t a strong subject, though. The GS is not doing the action; rather, the action is being done to the GS, and that makes it a weak subject and a passive sentence.

The way passive writing can be identified is by deciding if anyone or anything is responsible for the action. If it seems like the action happens by magic, that’s most likely passive writing. An R 1200 GS can’t ride itself anywhere, so that’s our first clue that this is a passive sentence. We need somebody to blame for that GS being ridden, and being able to quickly assign that blame when you read something is the key difference between an active sentence and a passive one.

Another way to identify the passive

**It doesn't get any better than this.  
The Alps, Tuscany, or the Mediterranean**

**RIDE TO THE TOP**  
with Beach's Motorcycle Adventures.  
Celebrating 40 years of European touring.

2763 West River Rd.  
Grand Island, NY 14072  
Tel: 716-773-4960  
e-mail: [tours@bmca.com](mailto:tours@bmca.com)  
[bmca.com/moa](http://bmca.com/moa)

Official Travel Partner  
BMW Motorrad

**BEACH'S**  
MOTORCYCLE ADVENTURES

ALTITUDE PROFILE ON A TYPICAL BEACH ALPINE TOUR - 2288 MILES HORIZONTAL; 462,841 FEET VERTICAL! A NATURAL HIGH. (You can't do this at home.)

nature of that sentence is to replace the past tense verb (*was ridden*) with a present tense verb (*rides*). If the sentence no longer makes sense – The R 1200 GS rides to the rally – then it is a poor sentence and should be rewritten.

There are two ways to fix passive writing and spice up your prose. The more difficult method is to rewrite the entire sentence to put a strong subject up front where we expect to see it, like in “Wes rode his R 1200 GS to the rally.” A second fix happens when you add “by” to the end of the sentence and then include a responsible party.

**The R 1200 GS was ridden to the rally by Wes.**

That’s not the most graceful sentence, but it clears up the ambiguity of the sentence by giving us somebody to blame for the riding. This second method is OK, but I always prefer fixing passive writing with the first method because it’s more exciting to read. Just adding “by” can often leave you with an awkward sentence that has its subject at the end instead of the direct object. (*Note: We’ll get into what a direct object is in a future column!*)

Here are some examples of passive writing that you can practice on if you like. In

addition, I included a few passive sentences in this column – can you find (and correct) them?

The R 100 RS was stolen. (*Hint: fix with “by.”*)

The punctured tire was plugged by George. (*Hint: fix by rewriting.*)

Oil was discovered all over the ground underneath her K 1300 S.

The final drive oil will be changed.

A BMW motorcycle was used as the getaway vehicle after the robbery.

You may have noticed that, at least in the examples above, all the verbs are made up of two or three words – was stolen, will be changed, etc. That’s another way to identify passive sentences. Active sentences use one strong, identifiable verb to show who did what.

Many of us use computers to write, and I would guess that most of us use word processor software such as Microsoft Word. Word puts a powerful grammar-checking tool at your disposal. If you use Word, go into your Preferences and set your grammar checker to Standard or Formal and remember to run it (Tools → Spelling and Grammar...) before you finalize your material. You can further tweak the

grammar tool by adjusting its individual settings and making sure “passive sentences” is one of the things it specifically looks for. While Word’s grammar tool won’t tell you the best way to rewrite passive sentences, it will at least identify them for you.

Motorcycling is an exciting sport, so we connect best with stories about motorcycling when they are exciting. The more active your writing is, the more exciting your stories will be. The more active verbs you include, complete with parties responsible for that action, the better a writer everybody will think you are! ☺

---

*Wes Fleming #87301 has been riding motorcycles for 20 years, writing and editing for longer than that, and worshipping Jack Riepe since conception. He’s been known to both drag a knee and dangle a participle, but only in his younger, more daring days. If you have suggestions for future topics for this column, reach out and suggest away at [wfleming@bmwmoa.org](mailto:wfleming@bmwmoa.org).*

**W Wunderlich**

**Complete Your BMW.**  
wunderlichamerica.com  
+1.831.761.1070

Comfort & Ergonomics | Luggage | Replacement Parts | Rider & Bike Protection | & Much More!