Twitter Thread by Daniel Solis, Jive Turkey



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Thread: Common instances of passive voice in rules text that can be clearer with more direct voice.

But first: Why do we so often write rules in passive voice? Outlining the "laws" of our game feels like a very formal position with an of aloof authority. Avoid that voice.

"THE PLAYER"

Question any instance of "the player" in a sentence. If you are addressing one player, address them directly in the first sentence of the paragraph and use "you" thereafter.

"If you are the first player, you may X, Y, then Z. If you X, see next page."

"HAVE/HAD/HAS/'D/"

Examine any of these words or contractions. There is usually a more succinct way of phrasing that sentence in the present tense and direct address.

"The player who has just moved must..."
vs.
"After you move, you must..."

"WE"

If you want to put yourself at the table with the players, do so CONSISTENTLY. A random "we" in one paragraph really sticks out. You can even play with voice that way.

"We suggest using option A for your first game."
vs.
"Ahoy, cadet! Use option A for your first game!"

"YOU MAY BUILD, HARVEST, or REST."

Break up action options into a bulleted list rather than a long sentence. e.g.

"On your turn, do one of the following:
• Build: Pay X to place a card.
• Harvest: Destroy a card to gain X.
• Rest: Draw a card from the deck."

In that example, your game may need more complicated sub-steps. If so, you can lead this section of the rules with "On your turn, you may BUILD, HARVEST, or REST." Then each action should be a distinct sub-section with details broken out into simple chunks.

An example from TAWANTINSUYU using direct, present-tense voice throughout. Most of the time, the writer doesn't even need to use a pronoun for the player. As a player, I know I'm being addressed directly. I'm told each option, consequence, and reference when it's most relevant.

(Noticed a typo in the first tweet of this thread. Ah well, that just means it'll get really popular, right?)

An example from Wikipedia rules for Chess. This is meant to be an authoritative encyclopedia entry, so the writers' voices skew more aloof.

"Moving is compulsory; it is illegal to skip a turn, even when having to move is detrimental."

Can you revise this to be less passive?

My revisions:
Delete semicolon.
Simpler syntax with fewer sub-clauses.
Avoid high school words like "compulsory" or "detrimental."
e.g.

"On your turn, you must move one of your pieces. You may not skip a turn. You must take your turn even if you have no good choices."

"IS/BE/ARE"

For example: "If the player to move has no legal move, the game is over"

Note "has" and "is" in that sentence. Both can be revised to punchier, more direct wording.

"The game ends if you cannot legally move."

Put the purpose of the sentence up front.

INTERRUPTING YOURSELF

Designers trip over themselves to warn about exceptions before we've had a chance to understand the default. e.g.

"The result is either checkmate (a loss for the player with no legal move) if the king is in check, or stalemate (a draw) if the king is not."

Revision:
"The game results in a CHECKMATE or STALEMATE:
• Checkmate: A loss for the player who cannot legally move a piece. Their king is in check and cannot escape.
• Stalemate: A tie between the players. Neither king is in check. This is neither a win nor a loss."

Better example of self-interruption:

"Players alternate turns, moving one piece per turn (except castling, when two pieces are moved)."

vs.

"Players take one turn at a time. On your turn, you may move one piece.*

*SIDEBAR:
There is one rare exception, see CASTLING on pg XX."

ADDRESSING MULTIPLE PLAYERS

This comes up a lot in the "setup" rules. You want all players to do the same thing, but maintain the active second-person present tense. You can do that with some clever sub-section titles, like "Each Player's Setup" as in GATES OF MARA below.

CONSTRAINTS / PROHIBITIONS

This came up a lot in GATES OF MARA. Each figure has a circle, square, or triangle shaped base, indicating where it may be placed. In this case, it was simplest to write each sentence as if the figure is the primary actor instead of the player.

It was very important that we explain how each figure got different rewards based on its placement position. So we made space in the rules to reiterate that as a cross-reference diagram. It's essentially the same information, just presented for visual learners.

GATES OF MARA also uses a mix of images & text in its play examples. Each step is a tiny, succinct beat. Again, this reiterates the main flow of the rules, just in a different way for different styles of learning. (Many thanks to @GamingRulesVids for editing duties on this.)

Another example of avoiding self-interruption. In GATES OF MARA, there are extra setup steps if your game includes the Fire Elemental Lord. We color-coded those steps in the text and number flags in the diagram. We also prefaced them at the very end of the instructions.

I digress. Back on topic of passive voice.

"WILL"

Designers often drift into future tense when outlining the basic turn to come. e.g.

"On your turn, you will play a card."

This is an easy revision. You can usually just delete "will." e.g.

"On your turn, you play a card."

MANDATORIES (must, have to, has to, etc)

Designers sometimes try to avoid repetitive text, so they mix up different tenses that mean the same thing in different words.

Rules are not prose. Repetition helps. Better to be consistent than flowery. If you mean "must," just say so.

CONDITIONALS (After/If/When)

If a game effect is triggered by a certain game-state, be consistent about how you word those clauses. Each is subtly distinct.

"AFTER you pay a coin," implies an order of operations. You first pay, then trigger another game event as a result."

"IF you pay a coin," is more immediate. The sequentiality doesn't matter here. It triggers a game event that doesn't affect any other player's turns, like gaining extra resources from an infinite supply or drawing cards from a personal deck.

"WHEN you pay a coin," or "WHENEVER you pay a coin," is an ambiguous middle-ground between "IF" and "AFTER." I tend to avoid it in my writing, if possible. I struggle to think of a use-case in which it would be preferable to use WHEN instead of IF or AFTER. Can you think of one?

SNEAKY PASSIVE VOICE (am, is, are)

Sometimes you think you avoided passive voice by switching to present-tense, but nope! Watch out for "to be" verbs like AM, IS, or ARE. Also avoid contractions like "I'm," "it's," or "they're." e.g.

"Enemy figures are moved by the gamemaster."

In active voice, that sentence would be:

"The gamemaster moves enemy figures."

Note that both sentences are present tense, but tense alone doesn't determine active or passive. A tricky distinction, but try searching for "are," "is," or "am," to find those little bugs.

Ooh. Found another example of addressing multiple players. DUNE: IMPERIUM, pg 5. The first line opens addressing all players. The sub-steps address "you" with the assumption that those instructions apply to everyone. It's as if the designer is at the table addressing the group.

Okay, my caffeine is fading, so I'll end this thread for now. ■ If you find any of this useful, toss me $1 at https://t.co/otmqUo2vcg