

Twitter Thread by Daniel Solis, Jive Turkey



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@DanielSolis



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 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.

ONE TURN OF PLAY

COMMON TERMINOLOGY

VP = Victory Point 🏆

Resource = potato 🥔, corn 🌽, stone 🪨, or gold 🏆;
gold 🏆 is a **wild** resource that can be spent as any other resource

Food = potato 🥔 or corn 🌽

On your turn, you must choose one of the following two options:

1. **Place a Worker:** Discard 1 God card or 1 gold to place a Worker from your supply on the game board.
2. **Perform 2 different secondary actions, in any order:**
 - Moving the High Priest,
 - Praying,
 - Training, or
 - Recruiting.

Additionally, as a **free action** at any time during your turn, you may discard any number of Army cards from your hand to gain the resources depicted on them. There is no limit to the number of times you can take this free action on your turn.

At the end of your turn, you have a chance to recruit more Workers, but you can never end your turn with more than 2 in your supply. For details, see *Recruiting at the end of the turn* on page 16.

If the Village is empty at the end of your turn, a Festival (Scoring) is triggered. Triggering a Festival is explained in its own section on pages 17 and 18.

At the end of your turn, replenish the Building Market if you constructed any Buildings. As in the Setup, there should be exactly four face-up Buildings (two of each type) in the Building Market before the next player takes their turn.

Special First Turn Rule:

Before taking your first turn of the game, start by placing your High Priest on the Coricancha tile on any of the spaces (even one already occupied by one or more High Priests belonging to other players). This placement only serves to determine the starting position of your High Priest and should not be confused with the Moving the High Priest secondary action described later in the rules.

(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?

Moving is compulsory; it is illegal to skip a turn, even when having to move is detrimental. A player may not make any move that would put or leave the player's own king in check. If the player to move has no legal move, the game is over; 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.

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.

EACH PLAYER'S SETUP

Randomly choose a Tribe to play. Take your Tribe's Player board and Figures, as well as the Claims, Caravans, Influence markers and Turn Order marker in your Tribe's color. Also take a Resource board and an Energy marker.

- 1 Place your Resource board above your Tribe board.
- 2 Place your seven Figures on their home spaces. Home spaces are marked by a corresponding image and base shape. The Figures are, in order from left to right:
 - ♦ two Merchants
 - ♦ one Specialist
 - ♦ one Leader
 - ♦ one Champion
 - ♦ two Enchanters
- 3 Place your Claims in either of the Resource Storage ovals.
- 4 Place your Caravans in the designated spaces on your Resource board.
- 5 Place 1 Earth Element gem, 1 Water Element gem, 1 Air Element gem, and 1 Fire Element gem in either of your Resource Storage ovals.
- 6 Place your Energy marker on space "11" of your Energy track.

The diagram shows a player's setup area. At the top are three ovals labeled 'RESOURCE STORAGE'. Below them is a row of seven 'FIGURE HOME ROW' spaces, each with a figure. To the right of the figures is a 'CARAVAN STORAGE' area. Below the figures is an 'ENERGY TRACK' with spaces numbered 1 to 11. A callout box shows a close-up of the Energy Track with a blue cube marker on space 11.

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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.

PLACE A FIGURE

PLACEMENT LIMITS

To place a Figure, you must pay its Energy cost by sliding your Energy marker to the right a number of spaces equal to the Figure's placement cost.

- ▲ **LEADERS** cost 3 Energy.
- **CHAMPIONS** and **ENCHANTERS** cost 2 Energy each.
- **SPECIALISTS** and **MERCHANTS** cost 1 Energy each.

You may only place your Figure on an **unoccupied** space. (Note that some Figure Abilities or Attachments may break this rule when placing on Realm board spaces.) Each Figure also has its own placement restrictions, as indicated by the shapes in the spaces on the boards, which match the relevant Figures' skirts:

- ▲ **LEADERS** may be placed only on Realm boards, Standard Gates, or the Central Gate.
- **CHAMPIONS** may be placed only on Realm boards or Standard Gates.
- **SPECIALISTS** and **MERCHANTS** may only be placed on the Realm boards.
- **ENCHANTERS** may only be placed on the Enchantment board. Each Enchanter **must** be placed on the leftmost unoccupied space, as indicated by the arrow.

LEADER GAINS KEYS

Key tokens accumulate on the Central Gate over time. If you place your Leader at the Central Gate, you gain all of the Key tokens there.

GAIN INFLUENCE

Placing a Figure on a **Realm** board gains you Influence in that Realm.

A Figure on a Gate influences all adjacent Realms, so placing a Figure on a **Standard Gate** gains you Influence in the two Realms on either side, while placing a Figure on the **Central Gate** gains you Influence in all Realms.

ENERGY COST TO PLACE THIS FIGURE: 3


INFLUENCE GAINED AT DIFFERENT PLACEMENT SPACES: 3, 2, 1

- ▲ **Leaders** grant: 3 Influence if placed on a Realm board; 2 Influence at each adjacent Realm if placed on a Standard Gate; or 1 Influence at every Realm if placed on the Central Gate.
- **Champions** grant: 2 Influence if placed on a Realm board; or 1 Influence at each adjacent Realm if placed on a Standard Gate.
- **Specialists** or **Merchants** grant 1 Influence at the Realm board they are placed on.
- **Enchanters** do not normally grant Influence because they may not be placed on a Realm or a Gate.


For each Influence you gain in a Realm, move your marker on that Realm's Influence track up 1 space. If your marker is at the end of an Influence track, any more Influence you gain in that Realm is lost.

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.


LEADER (TRIANGLE ▲)




...AT A REALM
Gain 3 Influence in the Realm.




...AT A STANDARD GATE
Gain 2 Influence in the 2 adjacent Realms.




...AT THE CENTRAL GATE
Gain 1 Influence in all Realms and any Keys stacked on the Central Gate.




CHAMPION (SQUARE ■)




...AT A REALM
Gain 2 Influence in the Realm.




...AT A STANDARD GATE
Gain 1 Influence in the 2 adjacent Realms.



MERCHANT / SPECIALIST (CIRCLE ●)




...AT A REALM
Gain 1 Influence in the Realm.



ENCHANTERS (HEXAGON ◆)

Enchanters grant no Influence because they may only be placed on the hexagon spaces on the Enchantment board.



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.)







EXAMPLE OF ENCHANTING

1. You pay 2 Energy to place an Enchanter.
2. You place your Goblin Enchanter in the next available space on the Enchantment board.
3. You decide to gain the Manipulate Wind Enchantment.
4. You pay 2 Air and 1 Onyx from your personal supply to the general supply.
5. Manipulate Wind earns you 5 plus the current round number in Points. It is round 2, so you earn a total of 7 points.
6. You attach Manipulate Wind to one of your Merchants. Your Merchant now has a new Ability the next time you place it. (Described in the example above.)



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.

SETUP

- 1 Place the Central Gate in the center of the table. Place 1 Key on the Central Gate.
 - 2 Take the gray Chaos Realm board and place it near the Central Gate.
 - 3 Randomly choose a number of other Realm boards equal to the number of players. Place them around the Central Gate, with the appropriate side of each Realm board for the number of players faceup. The 2-player side shows , while the 3/4-player side shows .
 - 4 Place one Standard Gate between each Realm board.
 - 5 Place the The Wanderer Figure into the indent above the Chaos Realm's Influence track .
 - 6 Choose 2 Elemental Lord Figures. You may choose randomly. Return the unused Figures to the box. They will not be used in this game. Place the first Figure above the first Realm board clockwise from the Chaos Realm. Place the second Figure above the second Realm board clockwise from the Chaos Realm.
 - 7 Place the Enchantment board to the side of the Realms.
 - 8 Shuffle the blue Banner cards and form a facedown deck near the Enchantment board. *(Do not include the Fire Banners.)*
 - 9 Deal 1 Banner card faceup onto each of the two designated slots at the bottom of each Realm board (except the Chaos Realm, which has none).
 - 10 Place the Hourglass on the "1" space of the round track located on the Enchantment board.
 - 11 Shuffle the Wanderer cards. Stack them facedown next to the Enchantment board.
 - 12 Reveal a Wanderer card faceup and place it in the marked space of the Enchantment board.
 - 13 Shuffle the Enchantment cards to form a deck facedown beside the Enchantment board.
 - 14 Deal 6 Enchantment cards faceup onto the Enchantment board in the Enchantment slots.
 - 15 Shuffle the Objective cards to form a deck facedown beside the Enchantment board.
 - 16 Deal two Objective cards faceup on the Enchantment board.
 - 17 Place the Element gems (Fire, Water, Air, Earth), Onyx nuggets , Keys , and Point tokens  to one side of the play area.
- Do the following steps only if the Fire Lord is in the game...
- 18 Set the Fire Lord Influence marker at "4" in the Realm where the Fire Lord is.
 - 19 Place the Fire Banners near the other cards. Do *not* shuffle them into the Banners deck. All the Fire Banner cards are identical, so you may keep them faceup if you wish.



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.



Each player chooses a color and takes all of its components.



Place two of your Agents on your Leader. Place your third Agent (your Swordmaster) next to the game board.



Place one of your two discs on the Score track. In a 4-player game, place it on the 1 space. Otherwise, place it on the 0 space.



Place your Combat marker (with the side shown at the right face up) on the 0 space of the Combat track.



Place four cubes, one each, on the bottom spaces of the Influence tracks of the four Factions.



The other 12 cubes represent your troops. Place three in one of the four circular garrisons on the game board (each player taking the one closest to them).



Place your remaining components in your supply, in clear view of all players.



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>