



3Cs MEDICAL WRITING

E D I T 5

Be Careful with the Passive Voice

*The fifth of twelve edits for clear,
concise, coherent English.*

SEAMAN MEDICAL, INC.

Why it matters

The passive voice isn't wrong.
Sometimes it's exactly right.

- 1 Use it when the doer is obvious or unimportant.
- 2 It keeps the focus on the action, not the actor.
- 3 It is common — and correct — in *Methods* sections.

Ask one question

*Does the reader need to know
who did it?*

YES

name the doer (active)

NO

the passive is fine

In Edit 4 the doer mattered.
Here, it doesn't.

When the doer is obvious

ACTIVE VOICE — BUT DO WE NEED THE DOER?

“The laboratory technician
calibrated the scales
daily.”

Who calibrates the scales?

Keep reading...

The doer here is routine. The point is
that the scales were calibrated.

See what matters

The doer (amber) is routine. The action is the point.

The laboratory technician
calibrated the scales daily.



THE DOER

Routine, and obvious.

No reader is wondering
who calibrated the scales.

Shift the focus

Now the focus is on the action.

**The scales were
calibrated daily.**

Doer: dropped, not missed.

The passive voice keeps attention where it belongs.

K E Y P O I N T

Use the passive when
the doer doesn't matter.

*Active names the actor; passive
keeps the action in view.
Use each where it fits.*

