

A Caution to My Colleagues When Teaching with "How Texas Teaches History."

By Christie Bogle (revised from original email exchange October 26, 2015)

The article, "[How Texas Teaches History](#)" by Ellen Bresler Rockmore¹ is brilliant in ways yet suffers a grave error at the same time.

Rockmore effectively critiques a rhetorical obfuscation, passive voice, and demonstrates that Texas textbook authors used passive voice to help white privilege and revise history. They obscure blame for and existence of slavery.

Unfortunately, the article misconstrues a stylistic choice as "grammar." This may seem trivial, but stay with me for a while.

Informally, the term "grammar" evokes a sense of right and wrong, educated and uneducated. Invariably, those also align with class and race.

Formally, American English language is divided into two major categories: standard and non-standard. Non-standard English is stigmatized with slurs like "ungrammatical," "broken English," and "dialect." These are attributed to the poor, the uneducated and/or non-white speakers.

I have seen many references to this article circulating with eager grammarians waiving it and proclaiming "see how important grammar is?!" Let me restate the problem.

The problem is that what the article is describing is a *style* choice, not *grammar*.

Rockmore says, "And some of these books distort history not through word choices but through a tool we often think of as apolitical: grammar." And later, "Whenever possible, use human subjects, not abstract nouns; use active verbs, not passive."

Here is the catch, both passive and active voice constructions are perfectly "grammatical." This remains true whether speaking about descriptive or prescriptive grammar rules. In descriptive linguistics, a grammar is defined as the unconscious set of rules that allows any native speaker of a language to function; it is literally impossible to get wrong. Prescriptive grammar is invented by the privileged class and is a political construct.

It does not break any prescriptive grammar rules to use passive construction. Agency is a rhetorical choice. Passive and active voice are available in most languages and varieties within them, even non-standard ones. The author of this article knows that, I am sure. I give her the benefit of the doubt that she opted for the simplest word. Maybe she feared the term rhetoric because it would open a can of unneeded worms? But "writing style" or another comparable term would have worked.

The claim made in the article, that grammar is "a tool we often think of as apolitical..." is fundamentally false. Grammar is anything *but* apolitical. The *only* way to be "wrong" grammatically is politically--to not be using Standard (read privileged, white, midland American) English. This is a deeply wounding social conversation.

In sum, I encourage you, esteemed colleagues, to resist grabbing the most inaccurate word in the article as our rallying point. It's a fabulous rhetorical analysis. But we are privileging whiteness and wealth by

waiving the grammar flag. It misses the point about obfuscated agency construction as a political and rhetorical weapon. It also decreases the gains made in one conversation about racism by reinforcing a different one.

ⁱ published October 21 in the *New York Times*