FOCUS on Sentences
By Anne Hallett

Generally speaking, good writers make use of concrete subjects whenever possible.

- The reason I am teaching is because I couldn't think of any other way to stay in school forever.
- I teach because I couldn't think of any other way to stay in school forever.
- Voting is the duty of every citizen.
- Every citizen has a duty to vote.

AVOID USING "IT OR "THERE" AS THE SUBJECTS OF SENTENCES

Instead of: In some primitive cultures, there are differences arising over what is bad and what is not, but the chief usually decides.

Use: In some primitive cultures, differences arise over what is bad and what is not, but the chief usually decides.

Instead of: There is a great preoccupation among teenagers today about the image they project to others.

Use: Teenagers today seem preoccupied about the image they project to others.

AVOID PASSIVE VERBS

Instead of: Theoretical approaches were developed by Clinton's economic advisors to decrease the deficit.

Use: Clinton's economic advisors developed theoretical approaches to decreasing the deficit.

Instead of: The dog was put out and the cat was let in by John.

Use: John put out the dog and let in the cat.
AVOID USING FORMS OF THE VERB "TO BE"

Instead of: His sensitivity is lost to such problems as injustice and despair.

Use: He lost his sensitivity to such problems as injustice and despair.

When writers use passive voice, the logical subject appears in the object position.

- My heart was left in San Francisco by me.
- You never will be lied to by me.
- Money and a room of her own must be had by a woman if fiction is to be written by her.
- If one redwood has been seen by you, all redwoods have been seen by you.

These constructions obscure the focus of the text, making it difficult for the reader to follow the logic.

Active voice sentences keep the focus of the text clear.

- I left my heart in San Francisco.
- I will never lie to you.
- A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.
- If you have seen one redwood, you have seen them all.

Passive voice sentences often follow abstract subjects and almost always lead to automatic use of the verb "to be." Consider the following possible subjects and decided which are abstract and which are concrete.

Politics
Intelligence
English students
Boxing fans
Opponents of Prop 209
Communication
In general, make the subject you are writing about the subject of your sentences.

**Instead of:** The incidence of moonlighting in academia is very high because teachers earn too little to adequately support themselves.

**Use:** Many teachers moonlight because they earn too little to adequately support themselves.

**Instead of:** The use of Valium is greater than that of any other prescription drug in the US.

**Use:** More people use Valium than any other prescription drug in the US.