The passive voice can be awkward, pompous, wordy, and downright ugly. Sometimes it can even be sinister.

Take a close look at that passage describing the new grading system. The students are being acted upon: they “will be characterized”; they “will no longer be commended”; they “will be told”; they “will not be described.” Who is responsible for these actions? Who do we complain to if we think the grading system is stupid or pernicious? The school board? The principal? The teachers? City Hall? Use of the passive voice makes these questions difficult or impossible to answer. Perhaps we are meant to sigh, shrug, and put the blame on the impersonal forces of Fate or Change or The Authorities. The passive voice, then, can sometimes involve moral issues even though it is most often a stylistic concern. Note the evasion of responsibility in the following sentences:

- Funding was reduced for the hunger program.
- The Accounts Receivable department has been determined to be 35 percent overstaffed.
- Fred was deemed to be a disruptive influence.

In fairness, for some special situations the passive voice can be altogether acceptable. When the person or thing or group that does the acting is unknown or unimportant, the passive voice often sounds normal and natural—more so than the active voice in some cases—and there’s no reason to avoid it. The passive sometimes works well, too, when the writer deliberately wants to sound formal and impersonal:

- The flight was canceled because of mechanical difficulties.
- In the Middle Ages, Aristotle was often referred to as “The Philosopher.”
- Payment must be received within ten days, or legal steps will be taken.

Watch out for the passive voice, then. It shouldn’t always be avoided, but most of the time the active voice works better—much better.

WORKING AT MCDONALD’S

Amitai Etzioni

A sociology professor and the founder of the Communitarian Network, Amitai Etzioni has been referred to as the “guru” of the communitarian movement. He has written more than two dozen books, is frequently heard on radio and television, and has published numerous articles in newspapers and magazines. Here, Etzioni turns these credentials toward a consideration of the seemingly innocuous topic of after-school jobs for teenagers.
McDonald’s is bad for your kids. I do not mean the flat patties and the white-flour buns; I refer to the jobs teenagers undertake, mass-producing these choice items.

As many as two-thirds of America’s high school juniors and seniors now hold down part-time paying jobs, according to studies. Many of these are in fast-food chains, of which McDonald’s is the pioneer, trend-setter and symbol.

At first, such jobs may seem right out of the Founding Fathers’ education manual for how to bring up self-reliant, work-ethic-driven, productive youngsters. But in fact, these jobs undermine school attendance and involvement, impart few skills that will be useful in later life, and simultaneously skew the values of teenagers—especially their ideas about the worth of a dollar.

It has been a longstanding American tradition that youngsters ought to get paying jobs. In folklore, few pursuits are more deeply revered than the newspaper route and the sidewalk lemonade stand. Here the youngsters are to learn how sweet are the fruits of labor and self-discipline (papers are delivered early in the morning, rain or shine), and the ways of trade (if you price your lemonade too high or too low . . .). Royal, Rogers, Baskin Robbins, Kentucky Fried Chicken, et al. may at first seem nothing but a vast extension of the lemonade stand. They provide very large numbers of teen jobs, provide regular employment, pay quite well compared to many other teen jobs and, in the modern equivalent of toiling over a hot stove, test one’s stamina.

Closer examination, however, finds the McDonald’s kind of job highly uneducational in several ways. Far from providing opportunities for entrepreneurship (the lemonade stand) or self-discipline, self-supervision and self-scheduling (the paper route), most teen jobs these days are highly structured—what social scientists call “highly routinized.”

True, you still have to have the gumption to get yourself over to the hamburger stand, but once you don the prescribed uniform, your task is spelled out in minute detail. The franchise prescribes the shape of the coffee cups; the weight, size, shape and color of the patties; and the texture of the napkins (if any). Fresh coffee is to be made every eight minutes. And so on. There is no room for initiative, creativity, or even elementary rearrangements. These are breeding grounds for robots working for yesterday’s assembly lines, not tomorrow’s high-tech posts.

There are very few studies on the matter. One of the few is a 1984 study by Ivan Charper and Bryan Shore Fraser. The study relies mainly on what teenagers write in response to the questionnaires rather than actual observations of fast-food jobs. The authors argue that the employees develop many skills such
has how to operate a food-preparation machine and a cash register. However, little attention is paid to how long it takes to acquire such a skill, or what its significance is.

What does it matter if you spend 20 minutes to learn to use a cash register, and then—"operate" it? What "skill" have you acquired? It is a long way from learning to work with a lathe or carpenter tools in the olden days or to program computers in the modern age.

A study by A. V. Harrell and P. W. Wirtz found that, among those students who worked at least 25 hours per week while in school, their unemployment rate four years later was half of that of seniors who did not work. This is an impressive statistic. It must be seen though, together with the finding that many who begin as part-time employees in fast-food chains drop out of high school and are gobbled up in the world of low-skill jobs.

Some say that while these jobs are rather unsuited for college-bound, white, middle-class youngsters, they are "ideal" for lower-class, "non-academic," minority youngsters. Indeed, minorities are "over-represented" in these jobs (21 percent of fast-food employees). While it is true that these places provide income, work and even some training to such youngsters, they also tend to perpetuate their disadvantaged status. They provide no career ladders, few marketable skills, and undermine school attendance and involvement.

The hours are often long. Among those 14 to 17, a third of fast-food employees (including some school dropouts) labor more than 30 hours per week, according to the Charper-Fraser study. Only 20 percent work 15 hours or less. The rest: between 15 and 30 hours.

Often the stores close late, and after closing one must clean up and tally up. In affluent Montgomery Count, Md., where child labor would not seem to be a widespread economic necessity, 24 percent of the seniors at one high school in 1986 worked as much as five to seven days a week; 27 percent, three to five. There is just no way such amounts of work will not interfere with school work, especially homework. In an informal survey published in the most recent yearbook of the high school, 58 percent of seniors acknowledge that their jobs interfere with their school work.

The Charper-Fraser study sees merit in learning teamwork and working under supervision. The authors have a point here. However, it must be noted that such learning is not automatically educational or wholesome. For example, much of the supervision in fast-food places leans toward teaching one the wrong kinds of compliance: blind obedience, or shared alienation with the "boss."

Supervision is often both tight and woefully inappropriate. Today, fast-food chains and other such places of work (record shops, bowling alleys) keep costs down by having teens supervise teens with often no adult on the premises.

There is no father or mother figure with which to identify, to emulate, to provide a role model and guidance. The work-culture varies from one place to another: Sometimes it is a tightly run shop (must keep the cash
registers ringing); sometimes a rather loose pot party interrupted by customers. However, only rarely is there a master to learn from, or much worth learning. Indeed, far from being places where solid adult work values are being transmitted, these are places where all too often delinquent teen values dominate. Typically, when my son Oren was dishing out ice cream for Baskin Robbins in upper Manhattan, his fellow teen-workers considered him a sucker for not helping himself to the till. Most youngsters felt they were entitled to $50 severance “pay” on their last day on the job.

17 The pay, oddly, is the part of the teen work-world that is most difficult to evaluate. The lemonade stand or paper route money was for your allowance. In the old days, apprentices learning a trade from a master contributed most, if not all, of their income to their parents’ household. Today, the teen pay may be low by adult standards, but it is often, especially in the middle class, spent largely or wholly by the teens. That is, the youngsters live free at home (“after all, they are high school kids”) and are left with very substantial sums of money.

18 Where this money goes is not quite clear. Some use it to support themselves, especially among the poor. More middle-class kids set some money aside to help pay for college, or save it for a major purchase—often a car. But large amounts seem to flow to pay for an early introduction into the most trite aspects of American consumerism: flimsy punk clothes, trinkets and whatever else is the last fast-moving teen craze.

19 One may say that this is only fair and square; they are being good American consumers and spend their money on what turns them on. At least, a cynic might add, these funds do not go into illicit drugs and booze. On the other hand, an educator might bemoan that these young, yet uninformed individuals, so early in life driven to buy objects of no intrinsic educational, cultural or social merit, learn so quickly the dubious merit of keeping up with the Joneses in ever-changing fads, promoted by mass merchandising.

20 Many teens find the instant reward of money, and the youth status symbols it buys, much more alluring than credits in calculus courses, European history or foreign languages. No wonder quite a few would rather skip school—and certainly homework—and instead work longer at a Burger King. Thus, most teen work these days is not providing early lessons in the work ethic; it fosters escape from school and responsibilities, quick gratification and a shortcut to the consumeristic aspects of adult life.

21 Thus, parents should look at teen employment not as automatically educational. It is an activity—like sports—that can be turned into an educational opportunity. But it can also easily be abused. Youngsters must learn to balance the quest for income with the needs to keep growing and pursue other endeavors that do not pay off instantly—above all education.

22 Go back to school.
WHAT DID THE WRITER SAY AND WHAT DID YOU THINK?

1. Why does the author say that part-time jobs are not especially educational?
2. What values are teen jobs often teaching, according to Etzioni?
3. How does Etzioni respond to the claim that these jobs “are ‘ideal’ for lower-class, ‘non-academic,’ minority youngsters” (paragraph 11)?
4. Does your experience support or refute Etzioni’s argument?

HOW DID THE WRITER SAY IT?

1. Who is the audience for this argument? How can you tell?
2. How does the author address the audience’s preconceptions and objections to his argument?
3. In paragraph 13, the author cites statistics about teen employment and says, “There is just no way such amounts of work will not interfere with school work, especially homework.” Is this statement logically self-evident? Is the yearbook survey cited after this statement enough support for Etzioni’s conclusion?
4. The essay closes with a paragraph encouraging balance between work and education followed by a single-sentence paragraph stating, “Go back to school.” Are these points contradictory? Why end the essay this way?

What About Your Writing?

Inseparable from Etzioni’s presentation of his own point of view about teenagers working at McDonald’s is his attack on what he considers conventional attitudes. His explicit rejection of those attitudes gives his thesis a dimension that it would not otherwise have had.

Getting started is a problem for many writers, and Etzioni here demonstrates one of the most effective ways of dealing with the problem: *Many people think such and such, but...* Instead of opening with a direct and sometimes flat statement of your thesis, let your thesis emerge as a response to some other people’s ignorance or superstition or sentimentality or general wrongheadedness. Your thesis will then exist in a dramatic context, not an intellectual vacuum, and will have built into it the appeal of a lively argument.

Most people think such and such about jobs for teenagers, says Etzioni, *but...* With a thesis that spanking small children is often the best method of handling certain difficulties, you might begin with a few satirical references to the belief that three-year-olds appreciate the fine points of logic and that the ideal family is a loosely organized debating society. With a thesis that country music is fun, you might begin by observing that respectable people