

Exploring WIDA’s Argue Language Function: Ideas for the Classroom

by Beth Dillard and Jennifer Green

Summary: This article takes a closer look at what WIDA calls Key Language Uses. The focus is specifically on how students can establish perspective through passive voice and language choice when engaging in the key language use of arguing.

Keywords: WIDA, functional language, argument, passive voice

In the [Winter 2021 issue of WAESOL Educator](#), Shafer Willer et al. introduced us to the WIDA 2020 English Language Development Standards Framework, and illustrated points of articulation between ELPA21 and WIDA. In this article we take a closer look at what WIDA calls *Key Language Uses*. We focus specifically on how students can establish *perspective* through passive voice and language choice when engaging in the key language use of *arguing*.

What Is a Functional Model of Language?

WIDA compares language to a toolbox “that we use to communicate, to develop relationships, and to act upon the world. Like any good toolbox, the language toolbox contains various tools that function for different needs” (WIDA, p. 20). This conception of language as a set of meaning-making resources draws on systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). SFL conceives of every moment of language being composed broadly of three key variables:

- Topic
- Power dynamics (between speaker/writer and audience)
- Channel (where the “text” falls along the continuum of spoken-like to written-like)

Particular combinations of these three variables solidify into genres, which are “goal-oriented social practices that have evolved in our culture to enable us to get things done” (Derewianka & Jones, 2016, p. 7). Think, for example, of how the genres of a fairy tale, lab report, and newspaper article vary in topic, audience, and format.

Language Use: Argue

In creating the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, WIDA researchers examined language use and expectations in K-12 US schooling. They identified four

genre families used widely in schools: *narrate*, *inform*, *explain*, and *argue*. In this article we focus on *argue*, or what others refer to as persuasive writing/speaking.

When practicing the language use of ‘arguing’, students at all grade levels are asked to use the following language functions: introduce the topic, select relevant information, and show relationships between claims and evidence. Starting in fourth grade, students are also expected to establish perspective.

At each grade band, and for each language function, WIDA provides concrete examples of the types of language features used to accomplish each function. In the remainder of this article, we focus on the language function of establishing perspective by examining some of the language features that accomplish the function, as well as ways you might enact these in the classroom.

Beginning at Grade 4, students constructing social studies arguments need to establish perspective through the following language resources:

- passive vs. active voice to emphasize the action vs. the doer(s) of the action
- “objective or emotive language to appeal to logic or feelings”
- “evaluative verbs, adverbs, and adjectives” (WIDA, 2020, p. 128)

Establishing Perspective Through Purposeful Use of Passive and Active Voice

Making conscious choices about when to use passive versus active voice allows an author or speaker to accomplish important rhetorical purposes. For example, passive voice focuses attention on the topic—or theme¹—itself, rather than the doer of the action. Active voice accomplishes the opposite goal, naming and calling attention to the doer, or agent. Authors often leave the agent entirely out of passive

sentences because it is already known by the audience (even in a general sense), is not relevant, or in order to purposefully obscure responsibility. Take the example below in Table 1, where passive voice minimizes or even erases the violent actions of colonists.

Passive voice	Indigenous land was stolen.
Passive voice (agent named)	Indigenous land was stolen by colonists.
Active voice	Colonists stole indigenous land.

Table 1: Example sentence in passive and active voice

In order for students to use passive voice effectively, they need to understand both how it appears in mentor texts and what the grammatical structure is. One activity that can help students recognize passive voice is the Passive Sentence Scramble activity. This task is highly kinesthetic and visual as students become the words in a sentence, and together transform active sentences into passive ones. To see how it works, take this sentence: *Someone stole my bicycle.*

Materials:

- Two silly hats
- A pair of sunglasses, “[mustache on a stick](#)”, and/or [a disguise](#)
- Several sample sentences in active construction, with each noun group and verb written large on a separate 8.5” x 11” card

Step 1: For our sample sentence, three students stand in the front of the room. One student, with a hat labeled *doer/agent* holds a card with *someone* written on it. Another student holds the word *stole*, and a third student, with another hat labeled *done-to/theme* holds a card with *my bicycle* on it. Have them stand in the order of

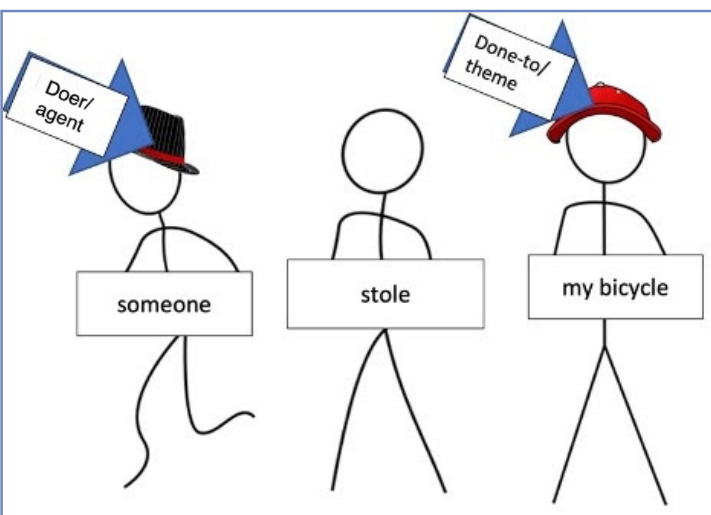


Figure 1: Illustration of sample sentence in original configuration

the sentence, *someone stole my bicycle*, as in Figure 1.

Step 2: Explain that you want to change the sentence to emphasize that your bicycle is gone, not who did the stealing. Ask, “How can we make that happen?” Engage the rest of the class in giving directions to the students in front. The *my bicycle* person should move to the start of the clause, continuing to wear the *done-to/theme* hat since the role of *my bicycle* has not changed. The same is true for *someone*. Same hat, same role, new location. The sentence should now read: *My bicycle stole someone*, as in Figure 2.

Step 3: Next, guide students to see that changing word order isn’t enough; the word *by* needs to be added to *someone* so that we know *someone* is still the agent (even though they’ve moved to the end of the sentence!) Use a small white board to write the needed new word and have students hold it up. The sentence will read: *My bicycle stole by someone* (see Figure 3).

Step 4: Have students read the sentence out loud, calling students’ attention to the verb. The active voice was in the simple past (*stole*), so the passive voice also needs to be in the simple past tense. A *be* verb is needed in the simple past (*was*), and the main verb must change into the past participle form (*stolen*) to make *My bicycle was stolen by someone* (see Figure 4). For young students, we don’t recommend using these technical grammatical terms to explicitly explain the grammar; rather, use this and other similar activities to give students ample exposure to the language.

Step 5: Finally, have the student who is holding *by someone* step away from the sentence and put on a disguise to show how the *doer/agent* can be purposefully hidden. Have students compare and discuss the change between the sentence in Figure 4 with the newly created: *My bicycle was stolen* as you see in Figure 5. You can also ask students to do this activity in reverse—from passive voice to active voice.

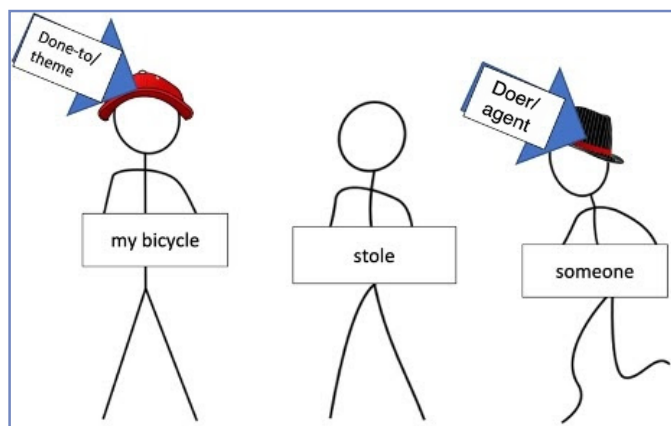


Figure 2: Illustration of sample sentence after passive inversion

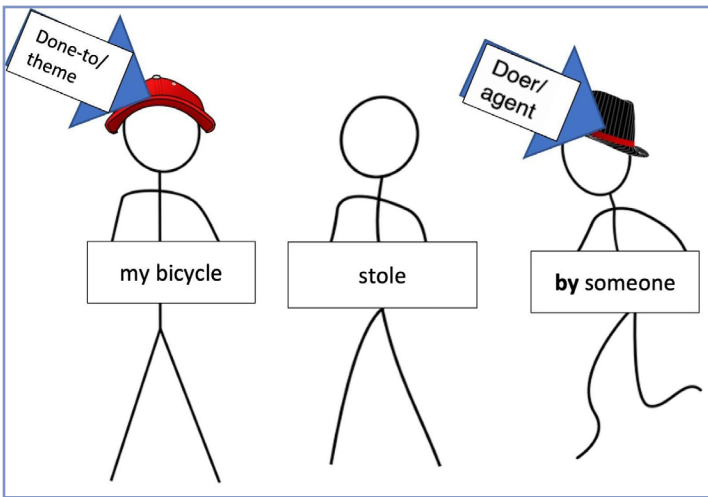


Figure 3: Illustration of sample sentence after addition of “by”

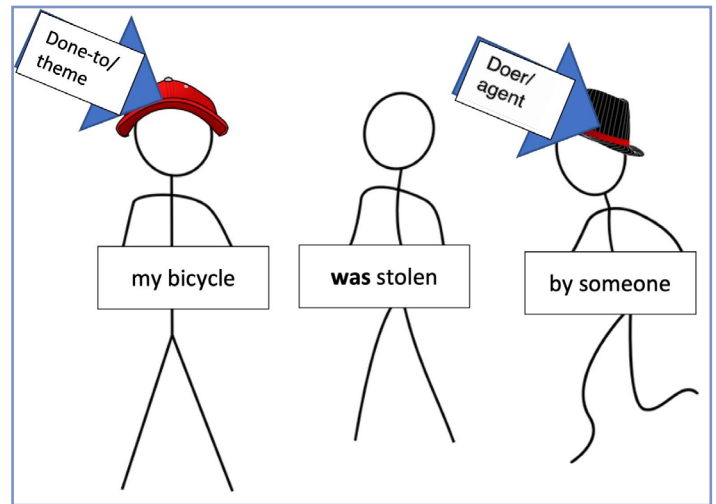


Figure 4: Illustration of sample sentence after addition of be verb

Language to Evaluate, Be Objective, or Express Emotion

Let’s focus now on the use of “evaluative verbs, adverbs, and adjectives” and “objective or emotive language to appeal to logic or feelings” (WIDA, 2020, p. 128). What do we mean by evaluative? According to Humphrey et al. (2012), as we express positive (e.g., smart, love, strong) and negative (e.g., unbalanced, a mess, useless) attitudes toward people, items, and experiences, we can also strengthen and weaken the force of those attitudes (e.g., clutter, a mess, a disaster).

A *word cline activity* allows students to engage with evaluative language as they explore the deeper meaning of words. An example of a cline of verbs related to *walking* or *moving* might be *stroll, walk, jog, run, sprint*. Here is how you can structure this exploration with your students.

Materials:

- Index cards

Step 1: If students are arguing against something that makes them angry, together brainstorm related words, such as *irate, furious, angry, annoyed, frustrated, upset, irritated, mad*.

Step 2: In small groups, have students write each word on a separate index card to create a set.

Step 3: Have students discuss the meanings as they order the words from *volume down* to *volume up*. For example, we might place them in the following order: *annoyed, frustrated, upset, irritated, angry, mad, furious, irate*. Another group might adopt a different order. There isn’t a correct answer for this task; in fact, conversations are better when students disagree.

Step 4: Have each group order their cards on the board (see Figure 6). Have the class compare and discuss the different placements, possible contexts for the different words, and so on.

This activity has the added benefit of expanding students’



Figure 5: Illustration of sample sentence with doer/agent standing apart



Figure 6: Word cline activity

vocabulary. Some students may be familiar with all the words, others may just know one or two. By having students debate a variety of words and their uses, students will add to their lexicon.

The genre of argumentation comprises many different language features. We have shared two of these features

within the function of *establishing perspective*. These activities promote rich conversation—and ultimately progress in language development—as students negotiate meaning with passive voice and evaluative language through peer teaching, visual and kinesthetic language learning, and vocabulary building.

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