

Writing and Communication Center

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Active/Passive Voice

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Active versus Passive Voice

When we talk about active versus passive voice, we're really talking about how the **verb** is used in a sentence.

- An **active verb style** leaves no doubt about who did what. The subject performs the action that the verb describes.
- A **passive verb style** can leave the reader wondering who did what. The subject is the recipient of the action that the verb describes.

Active/Acting vs. Being Acted Upon

Active: John ate the cake.

John is the subject in the above example and *ate* is the verb. It is clear that the subject **performed the action**.

Passive: The cake was eaten by John.

In this example, *the cake* is the subject even though it was the object **acted upon**. The cake becomes more important than John. It's more important to know that John ate the cake than to know that the cake was eaten. Active verb style is recommended over

passive verb style when the **performer of an action is more important than the recipient of the action.**

Short vs. Long

Active verb style sentences are shorter than the passive verb style sentences:

Passive: He was tickled by Mary. (5 words)

Active: Mary tickled him. (3 words)

Passive: It is my intention to start on my paper early in order to have it finished on time. (18 words)

Active: I intend to start early in order to finish my paper on time. (13 words)

Precise vs. Confusing

Precise verbs help eliminate confusion. The passive sentence below leaves the reader wondering: What kind of changes? Was the president fired or did he resign? The active sentence answers those questions.

Passive/confusing: The changes that were made by the company caused the president to step down.

Active/precise: The company's president resigned due to disagreements over policy changes.

Vivid vs. Dull

Vivid verbs help the reader visualize what is happening. Replacing a dull verb with an active verb, as shown below, can invigorate a sentence:

Passive/dull: The productivity of the company was way down.

Active/vivid: The company's sales plummeted.

Strong vs. Weak

Strong verbs energize sentences and assert ideas. In the example below, the active voice is more direct and forceful, as well as more economical.

Passive: When the play was brought to an end, the actors were greeted with a loud burst of applause by the audience.

Active: The audience burst into applause at the play's end.

Identifying Passive Voice

Any conjugation of the verb “to be” (the verb “to be” is a state of being, not an action: be, am, are, is, was, were, been, being) can be an indication of passive voice. The word “by” can also indicate passive voice if the noun following “by” is the “actor.”

Passive: The show was given a high rating by the critic.

To revise into active voice, place the actor (the critic) in the subject role and change the passive verb (was given) into an active verb (gave).

Active: The critic gave the show a high rating.

Exercises

Passive constructions:

- 1) A presentation was given by the students on the last day of class.
- 2) The reason the test was failed by Tim was because he misunderstood the question.
- 3) The course syllabus is being reevaluated by Dr. Johnson.
- 4) The priorities have been identified by the committee and they have issued a report.
- 5) Our road was blocked by a fallen tree, our house was covered by snow, our power was out, and the storm was getting worse.
- 6) Such announcements shall be issued as to completely inform all employees of any changes related to their employment.
- 7) There has been a lot of discussion on this controversial issue.

Active revisions:

There are many ways to revise passive sentences into active ones. Here are a few possibilities:

- 1) The students gave a presentation on the last day of class.
- 2) Tim failed the test because he misunderstood the question.
- 3) Dr. Johnson is reevaluating the course syllabus.
- 4) The committee identified the priorities and issued a report.
- 5) The swelling snowstorm enveloped our house, blew out our power, and trapped us with a fallen tree across our road.
- 6) Management will issue lay-off notices tomorrow.
- 7) Controversy surrounds this issue.

Sources:

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