

Active and Passive Voice

Foundation Lesson – High School

Verbs can be in either active or passive voice. In active voice, the subject is performing the action:

Mortimer scanned the headlines.

In passive voice, the subject does not act but is acted upon:

The headlines were scanned by Mortimer.

Notice that the word that is the subject in the active voice sentence (Mortimer) is now the object of the preposition “by.” And the word that is the direct object in the active voice sentence is now the subject in the passive voice sentence.

Another clue to passive voice is that the sentence will have some version of a “be” verb (*am, are, is, was, were*) plus a past participle. The verb in the passive sentence above is “were scanned.”

Activity One

1. Change these sentences written in passive voice to active voice. Highlight the subject and make this word the direct object in your new sentence.
 - a. The beanpole was climbed by Jack.
 - b. The ball was hit right out of the park. (You will have to supply the subject.)
 - c. A lesson was learned by the contrite child.

2. Now practice changing these sentences written in active voice to passive voice. Highlight the subject and make this word the object of a preposition in your new sentence.
 - a. Val has done a great deal of thinking lately.
 - b. The bluebird built its nest from small twigs.
 - c. Shakespeare wrote many sonnets addressed to a mysterious “dark lady.”

3. Decide whether these sentences are active or passive. Then change them to the other voice. You may have to supply a subject.
 - a. John Kennedy was assassinated in 1963.
 - b. You need to clean your messy room.
 - c. Many new manufacturing plants have been built along the border between El Paso, Texas, and Mexico.
 - d. The whole class was embarrassed by his actions.
 - e. We had a good time.

4. Which sentences sound awkward when changed?



5. In this paragraph, highlight the sentences whose verbs are in passive voice and change them to active. You may have to use first person.

The mountains of Colorado offer spectacular views and activities. Herds of elk can be seen crossing the highways. Limpid streams flow through valleys. Snow can be observed capping the tops of mountains. The biggest attraction of Colorado, though, for skiers is the perfect ski slopes. Ideal conditions can be obtained on the slopes of Colorado. Skiers flock to this state at the first snowfall. The annual thirty feet of snow is highly desired by skiers.

Generally speaking, active voice is preferable because of its directness and clarity of meaning. The active voice lends strength and vigor to sentences because the subject is clearly performing the action. In *Rhetorical Grammar*, Martha Kolln says this about writing in passive voice: “The faceless passive does an efficient job of obscuring responsibility, but it is neither efficient not graceful for the writing that most of us do in school and on the job.”

Passive voice often produces writing that is weak and vague.

- Passive voice allows people to evade responsibility for their actions.

Yes, Mr. Chairman, mistakes were made.

Your package has been lost.

It has been decided that you no longer have a job here.

- Passive voice is often awkward and unwieldy and can sound downright silly sometimes.

Increased energy can be obtained by exercising daily.

Her first night in her new apartment was spent in organizing the kitchen.

As soon as he wakes up in the morning, planning of his day is begun by him.

To finish knitting the cover for his new sports car, much boredom will have to be endured by him.

However, there are legitimate uses for passive voice. The trick lies in being aware when you are using passive voice and then using it deliberately for a certain effect.

- Sometimes the performer of the action is not known.

The statue of a cherub was stolen right out of her front yard.

The soldier was shot trying to cross the snow-covered field.

Marvin was wounded in Vietnam.

- Passive voice is useful in technical, legal, and scientific writing, where it is not necessary to know the performer of the action.

The artery was cauterized and surgically ligated.

“So far as we know, from Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity, the universe is constructed in such a way...that no material object and no information can be transmitted faster than the velocity of light.”

Carl Sagan, *Broca’s Brain*

Challenge

After you have written a draft, revise your writing by highlighting every sentence in which you have used passive voice. Change the passive verbs to active, and see if your prose has not improved.

Activity Two

Read the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence and answer the questions that follow.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.

1. Underline the sentences or clauses whose verbs are in passive voice.
2. Rewrite them in active voice.
3. What is the effect of Thomas Jefferson's use of passive voice?
4. What is the effect after these passive voice constructions are changed to the active voice?

Activity Three

What follows are lines from John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address, delivered January 20, 1961. Follow the directions in changing the voice. Two examples are answered for you.

Example One

"For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life."

- a. active voice
- b. change to passive: The power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life is held in man's mortal hands.



- c. effect of changing to passive voice: Man is not performing the action now. Kennedy wanted to stress both the humanity and the divine attributes of man. He did not intend for the emphasis to be placed on the “power,” but on “man” and his power to create both good and ill.

Example Two

“...the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans, born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage....”

- a. passive voice

- b. change to active: You will have to decide who passed this torch and use that as your subject.

Our ancestors passed this torch to a new generation of Americans....

Those who died defending this country passed this torch to a new generation....

The previous generation passed this torch to a new generation....

The previous administration passed this torch to a new generation....

The first Americans passed this torch to a new generation....

- c. effect of changing to active voice: What is important is not who passed the torch but the torch itself. To name a subject that passed the torch emphasizes people in America at an earlier time in history, and Kennedy is emphasizing the Americans of his day and his administration.

Your turn:

1. “Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”
 - a. Determine if the underlined part is in active or passive voice.
 - b. Change the voice.
 - c. What is the effect now? Is it equally effective either way?
2. “In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hours of maximum danger.”
 - a. Determine if the sentence is written in active or passive voice.
 - b. Change the voice.
 - c. What is the effect now? Is it equally effective either way?

3. “The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it, and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.”
 - a. Determine the voice of both underlined sections.
 - b. Change the voice.
 - c. Is either voice equally effective?
4. “And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”
 - a. Determine the voice of both underlined sections.
 - b. Change the voice.
 - c. Is either voice equally effective?

Challenge

After you have written a draft, revise your writing by highlighting every sentence in which you have used passive voice. Change the passive verbs to active, and see if your prose has not improved.