**Choosing between Active and Passive Voice Verbs when Writing**

(Adapted from materials at the Univ. of Arkansas Writing Center)

Usually, effective writing uses the active voice and shuns the passive. Nevertheless, some situations are awkward or inappropriate when expressed in the active voice. Certainly, these situations call for the passive voice.

**Identifying Passive Voice Verbs**

Verbs have two voices: **active** and **passive**.

In **active voice sentences,** the verbexpresses the action in the sentence, the subject performs the action, and the object is the recipient of the action. Active sentences follow the pattern: subject-verb-object.

Example: Jill kicked Jack.

In a **passive voice sentence,** the subject and object flip-flop. The subject becomes the passive recipient of the action.

Example: Jack was kicked by Jill.

**Form of Passive Voice Verbs**The passive voice requires a "double verb" and will always consist of a form of the verb "to be" and the past participle (usually the "en/ed/t" form) of another verb. Example: is kicked

Writers should be familiar with the forms of "to be" so that they can easily identify the passive voice in their work.

Review the forms of "to be": am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been

Note the forms of "to be" in the examples of the verb "to kick" in various forms of the passive voice:

**is** kicked----------------had **been** kicked  
**was** kicked-------------is going to **be** kicked  
**is** being kicked---------will **be** kicked  
has **been** kicked-------can **be** kicked  
was **being** kicked------should **be** kicked

Often passive voice sentences will contain a **"by" phrase** indicting who or what performed the action. Passive sentences can be easily transformed into active sentences when the object of the preposition "by" is moved to the subject position in the sentence.

Passive: The cookies were eaten **by the children**.  
Active: The children ate the cookies.

Passive: The tunnels are dug **by the gophers**.  
Active: The gophers dug the tunnels.

You should, in general, work to use the active voice, but you will find that in some situations, the passive is necessary.

**Reasons to use the passive voice:**

* The agent (doer) of the action is unimportant.

Example: The pyramids **were built** thousands of years ago.

* The agent is unknown.

Example: Several robberies **were committed** during the night.

* The agent is common knowledge, and mentioning it would be redundant.

Example: George Bush **was elected** in 2000.

* The writer desires to control focus of sentence.

1) to de-emphasize the agent’s role in the action

* + The alarm was triggered by my son. [Passive construction shifts focus away from the son’s responsibility.]

2) to emphasize the party receiving the action

* **Jack** was kicked by Jill.

But, again, in most cases, you should revise to change the passive voice to active.

**Reasons to use the active voice:**

* The active voice is shorter and more direct.

**Active:** The waiter dropped the tray of food.  
**Passive:** The tray of food was dropped by the waiter.

The active voice is less awkward and clearly states relationship between subject and action.

**Passive:** Your request for funding has been denied by the review committee.  
**Active:** The review committee denied your request for funding.

The active voice sentence pattern propels the reader forward through your writing thus avoiding weak prose.

Now, let’s try simply identifying the active and passive voices and changing one to the other.

**PRACTICE WITH ACTIVE VOICE**

**1. Directions: Change the sentences below to the passive voice.**

1. Children cannot open these bottles easily.
2. The government built a road right outside her front door.
3. Mr. Ross broke the antique vase as he walked through the store.
4. When she arrived, the changes amazed her.
5. The construction workers are making street repairs all month long.
6. The party will celebrate his retirement.
7. His professors were discussing his oral exam right in front of him.
8. My son ate all the homemade cookies.
9. Corrosion had damaged the hull of the ship.
10. Some children were visiting the old homestead while I was there.

**2. Directions: Change the sentences below to the active voice**. Put your corrected version underneath the original.

1. The statue is being visited by hundreds of tourists every year.
2. My books were stolen by someone yesterday.
3. These books had been left in the classroom by a careless student.
4. Coffee is raised in many parts of Hawaii by plantation workers.
5. The house had been broken into by someone while the owners were on vacation.
6. A woman was being carried downstairs by a very strong firefighter.
7. The streets around the fire had been blocked off by the police.
8. Have you seen the new movie that was directed by Ron Howard?
9. My car is in the garage being fixed by a dubious mechanic.
10. A great deal of our oil will have been exported to other countries by our government.

Now let’s practice identifying passive constructions and revising them out when it’s a little more challenging to find them.

**3: Working with Passive Voice Constructions**

Directions: Identify and eliminate the passive constructions in the sentences below.

1. The particular topic chosen by the instructor for study in his section of English 2 must be approved by the Steering Committee. [Hint: Start with "The Steering Committee."]
2. Recommendations concerning the type of study needed to assure adequate definition of the larger problem and develop feasible options in programs designed to eliminate or greatly reduce both the direct and indirect effects within a reasonable time and at acceptable cost were presented in the report. [Begin with "The report."]
3. Avoidance of such blunders should not be considered a virtue for which the student is to be commended, any more than he would be praised for not wiping his hands on the tablecloth or polishing his shoes with guest towels. [Hint: Begin with "We should not."]
4. Collaborative analytical determinations were utilized to assess the probable consequences of mechanical failure. [Start with "Analysts."]
5. The difference between restrictives and nonrestrictives can also be better approached through a study of the different contours that mark the utterance of the two kinds of element than through confusing attempts to differentiate the two by meaning. ["One can."]
6. Individuals whose income is insufficient to lift them above poverty must be provided with assistance from public sources. [Start active, and try "Supplement."]
7. In the next thirty-five years it is expected that there will be more engineering work to be done than has been done in all of recorded history.[Make "The next thirty-five years" the subject.]
8. If expansion is not accomplished, then two less-efficient alternatives must be acted upon: either the book sales will have to be in separate quarters or else the whole enterprise will have to be moved to a new location. [Try "we."]
9. Trees on average sites are expected to be about twenty inches in diameter when they are eighty years old if they are managed properly since youth. [Start "Managed properly."]
10. Any amended declaration should be filed with the Internal Revenue Office with whom the original declaration was filed even if you move to another district.

**4. Read this essay carefully paying special attention to passive voice verbs. Highlight in yellow all of the passive constructions and revise them by changing the passive verbs into active verbs where needed.**

Mistakes

Technological civilization has reached its present "advanced" state by the trial-and-error behavior of those who lived before us. Many of the most useful discoveries and inventions were the result of mistakes when people were looking for something else. The New World was found by Columbus, who was really looking for India. The discovery of penicillin was speeded by somebody who left a loaf of bread out to get moldy. Think how far behind ourselves we’d be now if mistakes were impossible for us to make.

Our knowledge is also increased by our mistakes, if only because once a mistake has been made, a way of correcting it must be found. If the mistake had not been made by us in the first place, we might have had no reason to learn how things are done. As I wrote the first version of this essay, I made a few minor errors. As a result of my mistakes, since I did discover them, I learned the difference between continuous and continual; I learned that useful has only one l (and that the rule goes for hundreds of other words, like wasteful, harmful, spoonful); and I learned how to use a semicolon when a comma won’t do. Had I made no mistakes in the first place, I might have had a pretty good essay, but I would still not have known why.

Of course, mistakes have to be recognized for what they are. If Columbus had thought San Salvador was India and let things go at that, the world would be smaller today. Had the moldy bread been tossed to the birds, the birds might have become healthy while human life went on suffering from raging diseases. (I realize these statements are somewhat doubtful, but now I’m so curious about Columbus and penicillin that I’m going to learn the real facts tomorrow.)

Mistakes are made by computers, but only rarely by comparison with the human brain’s continual bumbling. Human beings, one might say, have emotions and desires and prejudices that mistakes are the result of. Those quirks, are not things that computers have. Distractions, and fatigue are suffered by human beings but not by computers. So it is possible to say that we are in a bit of danger. If the time should ever come when most of the world’s work is done by computers rather than by people, fewer mistakes will be made. And fewer mistakes will mean fewer of those useful discoveries and inventions brought about by the stumblings of the human species.

Adapted from *Readable Writing: Revising for Style* by H. Wendell Smith p 112-114*.*