

LESSON 5: PASSIVE VS. ACTIVE VOICE



The Passive vs. Active voice refers to who is doing the action in the sentence. Active voice is usually more direct and succinct, and is therefore preferred. However, there are instances where passive voice is appropriate.

Passive voice sentences mention the thing or person receiving an action before mentioning the action itself, and may omit the actor altogether. For example, consider this sentence:

The leaves were blown by the wind.

The leaves receive the action of being blown. In the example, the agent is specified with the preposition by. However, the agent could have been left out of the sentence: The leaves were blown.

WHEN IS IT PROPER TO USE PASSIVE VOICE?

Consider these sentences:

- My camera was stolen from my locker at school.
- A candle will be lit at the memorial service for the fallen soldier.
- Diets are made to be broken.
- The sodium hydroxide solution was heated to 200 degrees.

Why they are appropriate in the passive voice:

- Who stole the camera? The agent is unknown. If you do not know who committed an action, it is appropriate to use passive voice.
- Who do you want to receive the attention? If you prefer the attention to be on the action itself (the candle being lit) and not the person doing the lighting, you may omit the agent.
- You are expressing a general truth that is applicable to many. Using active voice to express this idea would be awkward: People who make diets make them to be broken.

- Researchers often use passive voice in scientific reports. It is assumed that the reader knows that the experimenters are performing the actions without stating this fact explicitly. But, according to the University of Toronto, this trend is on the decline. Recent papers tend to contain more examples of active voice.

ACTIVE VOICE

Active voice mentions the actor or “agent” followed by the action, and finally the thing being acted upon.

Ex. The wind blew the leaves.

Changing from passive to active voices can also allow for getting rid of unnecessary words, vagueness, and long or awkward flow between sentences.

Tips for recognizing active voice:

- Follow the arrows! Make sure the actor is in the beginning, and the arrow points to the right.
- Look for forms of “to be”
- Look for the phrase “by the...”
- Try the paramedic method

The Paramedic Method

- Circle the prepositions (of, in, about, for, onto, into)
- Draw a box around the “is” verb forms
- Ask, “Where’s the action?”
- Change the “action” into a simple verb
- Move the doer into the subject (Who’s kicking whom)
- Eliminate any unnecessary slow wind-ups
- Eliminate any redundancies



CHALLENGE

Choose a book or article, and change the first three sentences from active voice to passive voice.

Further Study or Resources:

Paramedic Method Lesson

owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/635/01/

More examples of Passive vs. Active Voice

The Elements of Style, Third Edition, William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White,
Chapter 2, Section 14: Use the Active Voice, pg. 18-19

Email your challenge to laurelnakai@gmail.com by June 20