



Be Active: Avoid the Passive Voice!

Let's Review: Subjects...Objects...Action!

A play needs performers, props, and action. Similarly, sentences need subjects, objects, and verbs. The subject is the person, group, or thing that performs the action; the object is the thing being acted upon by the subject, and the verb is the action itself. For example: “In Shakespeare’s most famous play, Juliet drinks a sleeping potion in order to appear dead.” In this sentence, the action—what is being done—is the drinking of a potion. The subject—the person doing the action (the person drinking)—is Juliet. Finally, the object—the thing being acted upon (what is being drunk)—is the potion. Typically, the structure of a sentence positions the subject first and the object last, with the action in the middle:

subject → action → object

This sentence structure is called “the active voice” because the active subject is the focus of the sentence—it comes first. Try this one: “The basketball team played an exciting game last night.” Subject? Object? Action?

What is the passive voice?

When a sentence is written in the passive voice, the object of an action becomes the subject of the sentence. For example: “In Shakespeare’s most famous play, a sleeping potion is drunk by Juliet so that she appears dead.” The sleeping potion now comes at the beginning of the sentence, and Juliet is at the end. In this passive structure, the roles of subject and object are reversed:

object → action → subject

Here’s our second example in the passive voice: “An exciting game was played by the basketball team last night.” In this construction, the game is emphasized, rather than the team. In the passive voice, the subject—the most important part of the sentence—gets tacked onto the end, and doesn’t get the credit for its actions!

What’s wrong with the passive voice?

Voice—whether a subject is acting, or being acted upon—is not a grammatical error. Rather, it is an issue of style. Most writers use the active voice because it sounds stronger and is more concise. The passive voice can make your writing sound weak and wordy. It can also make your sentences indefinite. For example: “Our trip to the Philadelphia Zoo will always be remembered.” In this sentence, the subject of the sentence has been omitted altogether. By whom will the trip be remembered? The people on the trip? The keepers? The animals? When you write in the passive voice, your reader may be confused about who or what is performing the actions of your sentences.

How do I know if I'm using the passive voice?

- Look out for forms of the verb “to be”: is, are, am, was, were, has been, have been, had been, will be, will have been, being, etc.
- Look out for past participles, which are forms of verbs that usually end in “-ed”: loved, chewed, typed. Be careful with irregular verbs and their past participle forms that do not follow the “-ed” rule: caught (not “caught”), hang (not “hunged”), and stolen (not “stealed”). See EasyWriter pages 58-60 for more irregular verbs and their forms.
- Ask yourself: Is there an action in the sentence? Then ask whether whoever or whatever doing the action is the subject of the sentence. Remember, in passive voice, the subject might not appear at all. If it does, it is usually at the end of the sentence and is in a phrase that starts with “by.”

passive voice = form of "to be" + past participle

Make it active!

1. The coffee was slowly sipped by Carlo. → Carlo slowly sipped the coffee.
2. Why has the oven been left on by my roommate? → Why has my roommate left the oven on?
3. Joe claimed that his homework was eaten by his rabbit. → Joe claimed that his rabbit ate his homework.
4. When she braked too hard, Amanda’s car was hit. → When she braked too hard, _____ hit Amanda’s car.
5. In the investigation, lies were told. → In the investigation, _____ told lies.

Is it ever OK to use the passive voice?

- When you want to emphasize the recipient of an action (the object) rather than the performer of an action (the subject):
 - Baby Sophie was delivered at 3:47 this morning by Dr. Puffin.
 - On April 4, 1968, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed by an assassin.
- When you are writing a scientific or technical paper, the passive voice is preferred, as it focuses attention on what is being studied, and generalizes who is doing the study.
 - The numbers of new bacteria colonies were counted every two hours.
 - The new traffic light was installed at 53rd Street and Elm Avenue.

Try it!

PASSIVE VOICE	SUBJECT?	ACTIVE VOICE
My mid-term paper was given a poor grade by Professor Chan.		
The 80th Annual Academy Awards ceremony was hosted by Jon Stewart		
Pennsylvania is where Clinton and Obama are currently campaigning.		
"You owe money," said my accountant, after my tax forms were prepared.		
Fuel-efficient cars should be bought because global climate change is heightened by carbon that has been emitted into the atmosphere.		