25.2: Active and Passive Voice

There are two main “voices” in English writing: the active voice and the passive voice. You’ve probably heard a lot about them—and you’ve probably been warned away from the passive voice. But what exactly are they?

In the simplest terms, an active voice sentence is written in the form of “A does B.” (For example, “Carmen sings the song.”) A passive voice sentence is written in the form of “B is done by A.” (For example, “The song is sung by Carmen.”) Both constructions are grammatically sound and correct.

Let’s look at a couple more examples of the passive voice:

- I’ve been hit! (or, I have been hit!)
- Jasper was thrown from the car when it was struck from behind.

You may have noticed something unique about the previous two sentences: the subject of the sentence is not the person (or thing) performing the action. The passive voice “hides” who does the action. Despite these sentences being completely grammatically sound, we don’t know who hit “me” or what struck the car.

The passive is created using the verb to be and the past participle. Because to be has other uses than just creating the passive voice, we need to be careful when we identify passive sentences. It’s easy to mistake a sentence like “She was falling.” or “He is short.” for a passive sentence. However, in “She was falling,” was simply indicates that the sentence takes place in the past. In “He is short,” is is a linking verb. If there is no “real” action taking place, is is simply acting as a linking verb.

There are two key features that will help you identify a passive sentence:

1. Something is happening (the sentence has a verb that is not a linking verb).
2. The subject of the sentence is not doing that thing.
Usage

As you read at the two sentences below, think about the how the different voice may affect the meaning or implications of the sentence:

- **Passive voice:** The rate of evaporation is controlled by the size of an opening.
- **Active voice:** The size of an opening controls the rate of evaporation.

The passive choice slightly emphasizes “the rate of evaporation,” while the active choice emphasizes “the size of an opening.” Simple. So why all the fuss? Because passive constructions can produce grammatically tangled sentences such as this:

Groundwater flow is influenced by zones of fracture concentration, as can be recognized by the two model simulations (see Figures 1 and 2), by which one can see . . .

The sentence is becoming a burden for the reader, and probably for the writer too. As often happens, the passive voice here has smothered potential verbs and kicked off a runaway train of prepositions. But the reader’s task gets much easier in the revised version below:

Two model simulations (Figures 1 and 2) illustrate how zones of fracture concentration influence groundwater flow. These simulations show . . .

To revise the above, all I did was look for the two buried things (simulations and zones) in the original version that could actually do something, and I made the sentence clearly about these two nouns by placing them in front of active verbs.

This is the general principle to follow as you compose in the active voice: Place concrete nouns that can perform work in front of active verbs.

**Exercise \(\PageIndex{1}\)**

Are the following sentences in the active or passive voice? How can you tell?

1. Jayden drank more sodas than anyone else at the party.
2. The samples were prepared in a clean room before being sent out for further examination.
3. Karen was dancing with Joshua when she suddenly realized she needed to leave.
4. Carlos was a very serious scientist with unique interests.
5. When I returned to my room, my luggage had been stolen.

**Answer**

1. This sentence uses the active voice. **Jayden** does the action (**drank**) to the object (**more sodas**). If this sentence were written in the passive it would read “More sodas were drunk by Jayden than by anyone else at the party.”

2. This sentence uses the passive voice. The action (**prepared**) was done to the subject of the sentence (**samples**). If this sentence were written in the active it would be something like this: “[Actor] prepared the samples in a clean room before sending them out for further examination.” Since we do not know who prepared
the samples, the active sentence is incomplete.

3. This sentence uses the active voice. In this case was indicates that the sentence happened in the past; it does not indicate the passive voice.

4. This sentence uses the active voice. In this case was is acting as a linking verb. It links Carlos with the phrase very serious scientist.

5. The introductory phrase to the sentence (When I returned to my room) is in the active voice. The second phrase (my luggage had been stolen) uses the passive voice.

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**Revise Weak Passive-Voice Sentences**

As we've mentioned, the passive voice can be a shifty operator—it can cover up its source, that is, who's doing the acting, as this example shows:

- **Passive:** The papers will be graded according to the criteria stated in the syllabus.
  - Graded by whom though?
- **Active:** The teacher will grade the papers according to the criteria stated in the syllabus.

It’s this ability to cover the actor or agent of the sentence that makes the passive voice a favorite of people in authority—policemen, city officials, and, yes, teachers. At any rate, you can see how the passive voice can cause wordiness, indirectness, and comprehension problems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passive</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Active</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your figures have been reanalyzed in order to determine the coefficient of error. The results will be announced when the situation is judged appropriate.</td>
<td>Who analyzes, and who will announce?</td>
<td>We have reanalyzed your figures in order to determine the range of error. We will announce the results when the time is right.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With the price of housing at such inflated levels, those loans cannot be paid off in any shorter period of time.</td>
<td>Who can’t pay the loans off?</td>
<td>With the price of housing at such inflated levels, homeowners cannot pay off those loans in any shorter period of time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After the arm of the hand-held stapler is pushed down, the blade from the magazine is raised by the top-leaf spring, and the magazine and base.</td>
<td>Who pushes it down, and who or what raises it?</td>
<td>After you push down on the arm of the hand-held stapler, the top-leaf spring raises the blade from the magazine, and the magazine and base move apart.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>However, market share is being lost by 5.25-inch diskettes as is shown in the graph in Figure 2.</td>
<td>Who or what is losing market share, who or what shows it?</td>
<td>However, 5.25-inch diskettes are losing market share as the graph in Figure 2 shows.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For many years, federal regulations concerning the use of wire-tapping have been ignored. Only recently</td>
<td>Who has ignored the regulations, and who is now imposing them?</td>
<td>For many years, government officials have ignored federal regulations concerning the use of wire-tapping.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Passive | Question | Active
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**have tighter restrictions been imposed** on the circumstances that warrant it. | Only recently has **the federal government** imposed tighter restrictions on the circumstances that warrant it.

Exercise \(\PageIndex{2}\))

Convert these passive voice sentences into the active voice:

1. The process, which was essential for the experiment’s success, was completed by Enzo.
2. Alana’s toes were crushed by the garage door.
3. The cake that I worked on all day long is being eaten by Justin.
4. Rebeca’s favorite spot in the lecture hall had been taken by the time she got to class.

**Answer**

1. Enzo completed the process, which was essential for the experiment’s success.
2. The garage door crushed Alana’s toes.
3. Justin is eating the cake that I worked on all day long.
4. Because there’s a descriptive phrase, there are a few options when revising this sentence:
   - Someone had taken Rebeca's favorite spot in the lecture hall by the time she got to class.
   - By the time Rebeca got to class, someone had taken her favorite spot in the lecture hall.

Don’t get the idea that the passive voice is always wrong and should never be used. It is a good writing technique when we don’t want to be bothered with an obvious or too-often-repeated subject and when we need to rearrange words in a sentence for emphasis. The next page will focus more on how and why to use the passive voice.