

The Passive Voice



**IS USING A PASSIVE VOICE A GRAMMATICAL
ERROR?**

TODAY'S PURPOSE!!



- This Presentation will help you understand what the passive voice is, why many professors and writing instructors frown upon it, and how you can revise your paper to achieve greater clarity. Some things here may surprise you. We hope this presentation will help you to understand the passive voice and allow you to make more informed choices as you write.

Defining the “passive voice”



- Typically, the **doer** of the action is the subject of a sentence. However, a passive construction makes the **receiver** of an action into the subject of a sentence.

- Take a look at this passive rephrasing of a familiar joke:

passive rephrasing of a familiar joke:



Why was the road crossed by the chicken?

- Who is doing the action in this sentence?
- The chicken performs the action of the sentence (the chicken crosses), and the road receives the action (the road is crossed).
- But notice that “road” is the sentence’s subject, not “chicken.”
- As such, the sentence is passive – the subject is the receiver of the action instead of the doer of the action. Note how awkward this makes the sentence sound. The more familiar phrasing (**why did the chicken cross the road?**) sounds much more natural to the ear.

First Test



Here's a simple way to test whether a sentence is passive or active:

- Look at the subject of the sentence. Is the subject the doer of the action in the sentence, or the receiver of it?
 - If the subject is the doer of the action, then the sentence is active.
 - If the subject is the receiver of the action, then the sentence is passive.

Second Test



- Another way to determine whether a sentence is passive is to look for a form of the “to be” verb followed by a past participle.
 - **To be verbs:** is, are, am , was, were, has been, have been, had been, will be, will have been, being
 - **Past participle:** a form of the verb that usually ends in “-ed.” Some exceptions are words like “paid” (not “payed”) and “driven.” (not “drived”).
- form of “to be” + past participle = passive voice

Examples



- Are the following sentences passive or active?
 1. The metropolis has been scorched by the dragon's fiery breath.
 2. When her house was invaded, Penelope had to think of ways to delay her remarriage.
- HINT: "To be" + past participle = passive voice
 1. The metropolis **has been** scorched**ed** by the dragon's fiery breath.
 2. When her house **was** invaded**ed**, Penelope had to think of ways to delay her remarriage.

Take a look at this example:



- Is this a Passive Sentence? Why or why not?
- **The fish was caught by the seagull.**
- **HINTS**
 - Test #1: Is the subject the doer or the receiver of the action? Is the fish catching or being caught?
 - Test #2: Do you see a form of the “to be” verb followed by a past participle?

The Answer: Passive



- The fish was caught by the seagull.
- Test #1: The subject (the fish) is the receiver of the action, not the doer of the action. The fish is caught. The Fish doesn't catch.
- Test #2: There's a form of the "to be" verb (**was**) followed by a past participle (**caught**).
- This sentence is passive.

Your turn



- Which sentence is **PASSIVE** and why?
- 1.The metropolis has been scorched by the dragon's fiery breath.
- Or is it this one?
- 2.The dragon scorched the metropolis with his fiery breath.

Let's try again



- Which sentence is **PASSIVE** and why?
- 1. When her house was invaded, Penelope had to think of ways to delay her remarriage.
- Or is it this one?
- 2. After suitors invaded her house, Penelope had to think of ways to delay her remarriage.

Why professors frown on Passive voice



- The primary reason why our instructors frown on the passive voice is that they often have to guess what you mean. Sometimes, the confusion is minor. Let's look again at that sentence from earlier.
- **When her house was invaded, Penelope had to think of ways to delay her remarriage.**
- Like many passive constructions, this sentence lacks explicit reference to the actor—it **doesn't tell the reader who or what** invaded Penelope's house. The active voice clarifies things:
- After the **suitors** invaded Penelope's house, she had to think of ways to fend them off.

When is using passive voice a **good idea**?



- Sometimes the passive voice is the best choice. Here are a few instances when the passive voice is quite useful:
- 1. To emphasize an object. Take a look at this example:
- **100 votes are required to pass the bill.**
- This passive sentence emphasizes the number of votes required. An active version of the sentence (“The bill requires 100 votes to pass”) would put the emphasis on the bill, not the number of votes required to pass it.

2. To de-emphasize an “unknown subject”



- **2. To de-emphasize an unknown subject/actor. Consider this example:**
- **Over 120 different contaminants have been dumped into the river.**
- If you don't know who the actor is—in this case, if you don't actually know who dumped all of those contaminants in the river—then you may need to write in the passive.
- But remember, **if you do know the actor**, and if the clarity and meaning of your writing would benefit from indicating **him/her/it/them**, then use an active construction.

Do we need to know who did the action?



- **3. If your readers don't need to know who's responsible for the action.**
- Here's where your choice can be difficult; some instances are less clear than others. Try to put yourself in your reader's position to anticipate how he/she will react to the way you have phrased your thoughts. Here are two examples:
- **Baby Sophia was delivered at 3:30 a.m. yesterday.(passive)**
and
- **Dr. Susan Jones delivered baby Sophia at 3:30 a.m. yesterday.(active)**
- The first sentence might be more appropriate in a birth announcement sent to family and friends—they are not likely to know Dr. Jones and are much more interested in the “object”(the baby) than in the actor (the doctor).
- A hospital report of yesterday's events might be more likely to focus on Dr. Jones' role.

In conclusion...



- Identify
- Look for the passive voice: “to be” + a past participle (usually, but not always, ending in “-ed”)
- If you don’t see both components, move on.
- Does the sentence describe an action? If so, is the doer of the action the subject, or is the receiver of the action the subject?
- Does the sentence end with “by...”? Many passive sentences include the actor at the end of the sentence in a “by” phrase, like “The ball was hit by the player” or “The shoe was chewed up by the dog.” “By” by itself isn’t a conclusive sign of the passive voice, but it can prompt you to take a closer look.

Next, Evaluate...



- **Evaluate**
- Is the doer/actor indicated? Should you indicate him/her/it?
- Does it really matter who's responsible for the action?
- Would your reader ask you to clarify a sentence because of an issue related to your use of the passive?
- Do you use a passive construction in your thesis statement?
- Do you use the passive as a crutch in summarizing a plot or history, or in describing something?
- Do you want to emphasize the object?

Last, Revise



- **Revise**
- If you decide that your sentence would be clearer in the active voice, switch the sentence around to make the subject and actor one. Put the actor (**the one doing the action of the sentence**) in front of the verb.