

Using Passive and Active Voice

Professors often require that you avoid using passive voice and, instead, keep your writing in active voice. The professor has good reason for such a requirement because active voice is direct while passive voice is, well, passive. But why? And what exactly is voice, anyway?

Definition

Voice refers to the relationship between a subject and its active verb. In active voice, the subject does the action to something else.

Example: Mary hit the ball.

The subject (*Mary*) does the action (*hit*) to something else (*the ball*). In passive voice, the subject receives the action, but the reader doesn't always know who does the action.

Example: The ball was hit.

The subject (*ball*) receives the action (*was hit*), but we do not know who actually did the action. If that piece of information is known, it can be found in a prepositional phrase, usually after the verb.

Example: The ball was hit *by Mary*.

In both the examples above, the reader knows that Mary is a pretty good ball player, but the sentence in active voice is more direct since the writer wants to focus on Mary, so *Mary* is the subject of the sentence. Passive voice, on the other hand, focuses on the receiver of the action since the receiver (in this case *the ball*) is the subject of the sentence.

Style

So what's wrong with passive voice? Nothing is actually wrong with passive voice; it's just not always the most appropriate method of relaying ideas. It does have its place in writing (more about that later), but active voice is clearer and sharper and more energetic than passive. Overuse of passive voice can get boring for a reader, and a writer's priority is keeping the reader's attention in order to convey information.

Look at the following sentences that are written in passive voice:

- 1. The jury was convinced by the defense attorney that the defendant was innocent.**
 - 2. The books were shelved in alphabetical order by the library workers.**
 - 3. The students were told that classes would begin on Tuesday, not Monday.**
 - 4. The proofs of the portraits are being shown to the contestants by the photographer.**
- In each example, notice the form that the verb takes: a form of *to be* (*being, is, am, are, was, were*) followed by the past participle form of the verb (*convinced, shelved, told, shown*). Are these sentences wrong? Not really. Are they awkward? Somewhat, especially sentences 1, 2, and 4. These sentences could have been worded much more clearly.

- 1. The defense attorney convinced the jury that the defendant was innocent.**
- 2. The library workers shelved the books in alphabetical order.**
- 4. The photographer is showing the proofs of the portraits to the contestants.**

Use of passive voice

So when should passive voice be used? (Did you notice that the previous sentence is written in passive voice?) Two major reasons exist for using passive voice:

- The writer wants to focus on the receiver of the action, not the doer.
- The doer of the action is not known, or is not important.

Sentence number 3 above is an example of a good use of passive voice. In that sentence, it may not be important to the reader **who** told the students, just that they had been informed. Consider the following sentence:

The lost boy was found in the woods near his home.

Again, in this sentence, **who** found the boy is not necessary to the sentence (in fact, that information may not even be known), but the important information is that the boy was found; therefore, that sentence could be written in passive voice.

Finally. . .

When professors tell you to avoid passive voice, what they may actually want is for you to avoid linking verbs (forms of *to be* plus the sense verbs and *seem/become* verbs) and use action verbs instead. Writing that employs action verbs is more vibrant and, thus, more readable than prose that overflows with linking verbs. So don't be passive; act on this advice.

Need more help? Try these two web sites:

<http://webster4.comnet.edu/grammar/passive.htm>

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/grammar/g_actpass.html