

Passive Voice

Avoiding passive voice is a key tool of effective writing. Use active voice whenever possible.

- Passive voice means the subject receives the action:
“The ball was hit.”
- Active voice means the subject is performing the verb:
“Barry hit the ball.”

The passive voice does exist for a reason, however, and is recommended in two situations.

- When it more important to draw attention to the person or thing acted upon:
“The unidentified victim was apparently struck during the early morning hours.”
- When the actor in the situation is not important:
“The aurora borealis can be observed from this glacier.”

Passive voice is customary in scientific or technical writing, where the actor is not as important as the process or principle being described. Instead of writing “I poured 20cc of acid into the beaker,” you might say “20cc of acid was poured into the beaker.”

On the whole, however, if you can say the same thing in active voice, do so. Your text will have more pizzazz as a result.

Formula To Recognize Passive Voice

Once you know what to look for, passive constructions are easy to spot. Look for a form of “to be” -- *is, are, am, was, were, has been, have been, had been, will be, will have been, being* -- followed by a past participle.

The past participle is a form of the verb that typically, but not always, ends in “-ed” (some exceptions to the “-ed” rule are words like “paid,” not “payed,” and “driven,” not “drived”).

To recap, here’s the sure-fire formula for identifying the passive voice:

form of “to be” + past participle = passive voice

A sentence in passive voice may also have “by the . . .” after the verb.

Practice Exercise

Convert the following sentences from passive voice to active voice.

“Research will be presented by the student at the conference.”

“The entrance exam was failed by over one-third of the applicants to the school.”

“An outstanding grade is given to Ian by Professor Chadwick.”

“We have been inspired by the speaker’s remarks.”

“A number of things are indicated by these results.”

Sources and Further Reading/Practice:

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