

PASSIVE VOICE

In an **ACTIVE** sentence, the person doing the acting is the subject of the sentence and the object upon which he is acting is the object. Observe.

The dog caught the frisbee.

"The dog," a noun with an article introducing it, is the subject of the sentence.

"Caught" is the verb. It's an active verb, not a linking for "be" verb (form of "to be" – am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been). What did the dog catch? The dog caught the frisbee. "The frisbee" is a noun (part of speech) functioning as a direct object (part of sentence).

OK, so that's all fine and dandy, but that's a good, active sentence. Active sentences are those with active verbs that make you feel a part of the action – which is what all good writing should do. Specific nouns. Colorful and descriptive adjectives. Active verbs. Ah, if only writing were so simple.

In a **PASSIVE** sentence, the person doing the acting is the object of a preposition in the sentence and the object upon which he is acting is the subject. Observe.

The frisbee was caught by the dog.

"The frisbee," a noun with an article introducing it, is the subject of the sentence.

"Was caught" is the compound verb. It's a form of "to be" with a past participle. In this case, the verb is actually in simple past tense in passive voice. In fact, there are many tenses.

• past	The dog caught the ball.	
• present	The dog hears the train coming.	
• future	The dog will catch the ball.	
• present progressive	The dog is playing ball.	"be" (present) + ing
• past progressive	The dog was playing ball	"be" (past) + ing
• present perfect	The dog has played ball.	"have" (present) + ed
• past perfect	The dog had played ball.	"have" (past) + ed
• future perfect	The dog will have played ball.	"have" (future) + ed
• past perfect progressive	The dog has been playing ball.	"have" + "be" (past) + ing

And of course, the actor, the dog, is the object of the preposition "by."

Active voice is clearly much stronger. Consider the following sentences.

The meal was catered by Sino Wok.

The first sentence is a classic example of passive voice. It's an easy trap to fall into and always results in weaker writing. Why not just say, "Sino Wok catered the meal.?" Active verb. Shorter. Stronger sentence.

The dinner tables were covered with white sheets.

IMPROVE YOUR WRITING

1. **Replace “be” verbs with more active verbs.** Look for “be” verbs. They’re weak. See if you can replace them with more active verbs such as to run, to walk, to saunter, to jive, to mourn, to speak, to cover, to cater, to dampen, etc.
2. **Replace passive voice with active voice.** See if those “be” verbs are followed by (typically) past participles. Then look to see if there is a prepositional phrase that tells you who or what did the acting. If so, or if you can determine who did the acting, rewrite the sentence in active voice.

Who covered them? A good reporter, who found this fact significant, would find out and let the reader know. OK, maybe it’s not the most important detail in a feature lead in which the writer is trying to set the scene, but in the body of the story, don’t keep me in suspense.

The rally was deemed a success.
This is opinionated. Who deemed it a success? A critical fact. Find out and tell me. Remember, as journalists, you’re observers of the action, objective observers, not participants. Don’t let your opinion creep into the story. Report the opinion of other students and attribute their quotes.

Students’ spirits were not dampened.
Were not dampened by what? Tell me. Don’t keep me in suspense.

So, if passive voice is so bad, why was it invented? Well, truly, there are times when passive voice is appropriate and not just a sign of lazy writers and reporters. Some people say never use passive voice. I wouldn’t go that far. Consider

Kennedy assassinated
This was a breaking news headline in the *Dallas Morning News* and many other newspapers across America. It’s in passive voice. “(President John F.) Kennedy (was) assassinated (by person or persons unknown).” In fact, that last part, what would be the object of the preposition is the key. They didn’t know, at the time, who did the shooting. *When you don’t know who the actors are, or when the person being acted upon is more important than who did the acting, passive voice is appropriate.*

RESOURCES

Undoubtedly there are many good books on improving your writing. But check out this Web site:

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>

It has more information than you could ever want on knowing about writing and how to improve it.

PASSIVE VOICE

Some of the following sentences are in passive voice. If they are, write "Passive" in the space provided. If not, write "Active" in the space provided. If they're in passive voice, rewrite the sentence in active voice or tell me what you'd have to know to do so. Along the way, make note of any other grammar, spelling, punctuation or style errors.

1. The ram was maliciously painted a bright shade of red.
2. At the United Nations, a case was being made against Iraq by Condoleezza Rice.
3. The football team will have a winning season next year.
4. A free operating word processor is provided by Open Office to anyone who wants it.
5. The sandwiches for the staff is being prepared by East Village.
6. After the speech, the chancellor was taken from the podium by university police.
7. He was rowing fourty miles a day to get in shape for the race.
8. The florescent highlighter can be used by anyone who can find it.
9. After class, the baby will be picked up by FedEx at day care.
10. The user friendly system was installed by Joel Ebel.