

Passive Voice: Why It Is Evil and How to Recognize It.

There are two "voices" in English grammar: **active voice** and **passive voice**. The difference is subtle at first, but easy to master once the grammarian understands the basics. Examine the **subject** and the **main verb** of the two sentences below:

(A) The **boy** hit the ball.

(B) The **ball** was hit. (Or, the **ball** was hit by the boy).

In sentence A, we might ask ourselves, what is it that does the hitting? The answer is the subject, **boy**. That subject is *actively* performing the verb; it is actively "doing" the verb hit to a direct object, the ball. This virtuous sentence is in **active voice**.

In sentence B, if we ask ourselves what is the subject? (**Ball.**) What is the subject doing? (Nothing.) The subject is not hitting anything else. So who exactly is doing the verb? It is not clear unless we stick a prepositional phrase "by the boy" on the end of the sentence. The subject is *passively* sitting, doing nothing, while some outside agent performs the action (hitting). Since the subject of the sentence is passive grammatically, the sentence is a **passive voice** sentence.

Note: Sometimes the passive voice sentence is necessary when the speaker wants to hide the agent or obscure what occurs. For instance, a governor up for reelection might say, "Last election **taxes were raised** over the course of the year." The passive voice sentence hides the actor. It would be uncomfortable for him to tell potential voters, "Last election, **I raised** taxes over the course of the year." In that last sentence, the one who did the action is painfully clear! This type of situation is one of the few times that passive form proves useful, albeit in a somewhat deceptive way. Some of the sciences also prefer to use the passive voice, especially when the action performed, as in an experiment, is the focus rather than the one doing the action.

In almost all other cases, it is better rhetoric to use active voice. It is a better choice for several reasons:

(1) Active voice sentences are often more concise than passive voice. Expressing the same idea in passive voice frequently takes 30 percent to 40 percent more words:

The fighter punched Ali and dodged the uppercut. (Active voice--8 words)

Ali was punched by the fighter, and then an uppercut was dodged by him.

(Passive voice--14 words, about 40 percent longer)

In the last generation, the family built a new house and raised a new brood of children. (Active voice: 17 words)

In the last generation, a new house was built by the family, and a new brood of children was raised by them.

(Passive voice--25 words, about 30 percent longer)

(2) Passive voice requires more "weak" words. Abstract words like *is/am/are/was/were/being/been*, the demonstrative pronoun "*the*," and prepositions like "*by*" and "*of*" are dull and colorless in comparison to "strong" words. Strong words include concrete nouns, powerful verbs, and vivid adjectives. To make clear who is doing what, writers who use passive voice often have to tag unwieldy phrases at the end of clauses, such as "by so-and-so." For instance:

The airplane was flown (by the pilot).

The crackers were eaten (by the puppy).

In the moonlight, the tango was danced (by the couple).

The *to-be* verbs and the prepositions do not add much to the sentence in terms of color. It would be far more *active* to simply write the following:

The pilot flew the airplane.

The puppy ate the crackers.

In the moonlight, the couple danced the tango.

Remember, the heart of your sentence beats within its strong verbs, concrete nouns, and vivid description. Prepositions and articles are dead weight. If you understand that, it follows that your writing will be more direct and powerful if fewer prepositions and articles clog the sentence structure. Using active voice consistently is one way to ensure that doesn't happen.

(3) The passive voice clause can be confusing or unclear, especially in long sentences.

My car has been driven to Dallas.

(By whom? By the speaker? By a car-thief? By the teletubbies?)

Sixteen thousand calories were consumed in one sitting.

(Who is doing this monstrous act of dietary vandalism?)

Five FBI agents entered the room, and the terrorist was plastered against the wall.

(Does that mean the five FBI agents plastered the terrorist against the wall? Or does it mean when the five FBI agents entered the room, the terrorist had plastered himself against the wall? Or did someone else entirely plaster the terrorist against the wall before the FBI arrived? It is impossible to tell with passive voice structure in the last clause.)

However, the author frequently doesn't know who did the action either.

A woman was mugged last night in Las Vegas.

My diary has been stolen!

In sentences like these, it is difficult to assert whether it would be better to leave the passive voice (which in this case is fairly concise), or to add active voice structure (which in these cases, adds extra length). When in doubt, stick with active voice. *An assailant mugged a woman last night in Las Vegas. A thief stole my diary!*

(4) Passive voice often leads to awkward or stilted writing, especially in academic arguments in which the student dons a "pseudo-scholarly" tone.

When a reason is to be considered by readers for an argument that has been made by a writer, it is fitting that their analysis be based upon the latest statistical evidence. If consensus cannot be reached, compromises should be made, and then negotiations should be undertaken by both parties with outside arbitration.

This sentence sounds more like jumbled "scholarese" rather than a useful, direct, rhetorical exhortation. If sentence after sentence appears in this format, it can drive a reader insane with its contorted, artificial syntax. Nobody talks that way, so why write that way?

(5) Linguistic studies show that native English speakers are better able to remember material they read in active voice than the same material in passive voice. Something about the English speaker's mind remains geared toward a "Subject-Verb-Object" pattern. Passive voice sentences somehow derail that mental process of retention. If you want your readers to remember what you wrote, use active voice. If they better remember the material you spent so much time writing, you have a better chance at creating an argument that will stick with them and change their way of thinking.

Three Warning Signs of the Unholy Sentence Construction (Passive Voice)

Ask yourself three questions to identify the evil sentence. If you spot the dreaded passive voice, cleanse your paper from its infernal taint by converting the sentence to active voice:

1. Is there a form of the verb "to be" in the sentence, such as *is/am/are/was/were/be/being/ been*? (It is impossible to create the passive voice unless the author uses a "to be" verb.)

2. Could one insert the phrase "by so-and-so" after the verb? If so, would the sentence still make sense? If so, you may have passive voice. For instance, *the dog was fed (by his owner)*.

3. Identify the subject and the main verb in the clause. Is the subject "doing" the action? Or is it sitting passively while some outside agent "does" the verb to the subject?