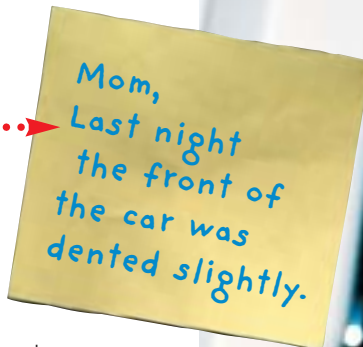


Activate Your Verbs

THE PASSIVE VOICE: HOW TO SPOT IT, AND WHY TO AVOID IT

By Jennifer Dignan

Friday night, you borrow your mom's car. Saturday morning, she finds a sticky note on the refrigerator that says:



And just who dented the car? You, obviously, but you're hoping that your use of the passive voice will somehow make your mom think of the damage as something that "just happened," right? The truth is, the passive voice is probably not going to help you—not here, nor in anything else you write.



Passive Pitfalls

Watch out for these common problems that result from using the passive voice:

SHIFTING VOICE. Starting a sentence in the active voice and shifting to the passive can cause awkwardness and confusion.

Example: Karen wasn't *satisfied* with her painting, but it *was admired* by her classmates.

Revision: Karen wasn't *satisfied* with her painting, but her classmates *admired* it.

DANGLING MODIFIERS CAUSED BY THE USE OF PASSIVE VOICE. A **dangling modifier** is a word or phrase that modifies a word not clearly stated in the sentence.

Example: Finding the initial results inconclusive, the test *was repeated*.

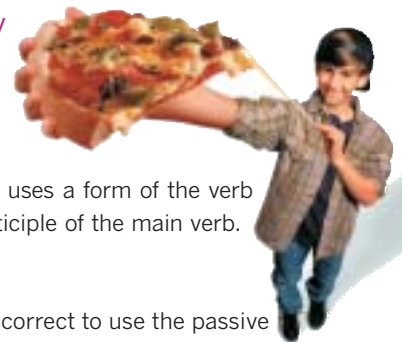
Revision: Finding the initial results inconclusive, *the doctor repeated* the test.

> THE VOICE OF THE VERB

Verbs are said to be either active or passive in **voice**. The voice tells the reader whether the subject of the sentence performs or receives the action of the verb. In the active voice, the subject performs the action of the verb. In the passive voice, the subject receives the action of the verb.

Passive: The entire pizza was eaten by Jerome.

Active: Jerome ate the entire pizza.



The passive voice always uses a form of the verb "to be" plus the past participle of the main verb.

> TAKE ACTION

It is not grammatically incorrect to use the passive voice, but your writing will be more concise, clearer, and more engaging if you write primarily in the active voice. Here's why:

1 Passive voice makes for wordy writing. Compare these two sentences:



Passive: Dave was invited to the concert by Kate.

Active: Kate invited Dave to the concert.

The passive voice can lead to unnecessarily wordy writing when a verb is turned into a noun and used as the subject of the sentence, as in the following example:

Passive: Confirmation of Steven's story cannot be obtained by us.

The verb "obtained" has no real function in this sentence. Changing the sentence to the active voice allows for the elimination of "obtained" and allows "We" to assume its proper role as the subject of the sentence:

Active: We cannot confirm Steven's story.

2 Because the passive voice often neglects to specify who or what is performing the action, it often results in flat or confusing writing.

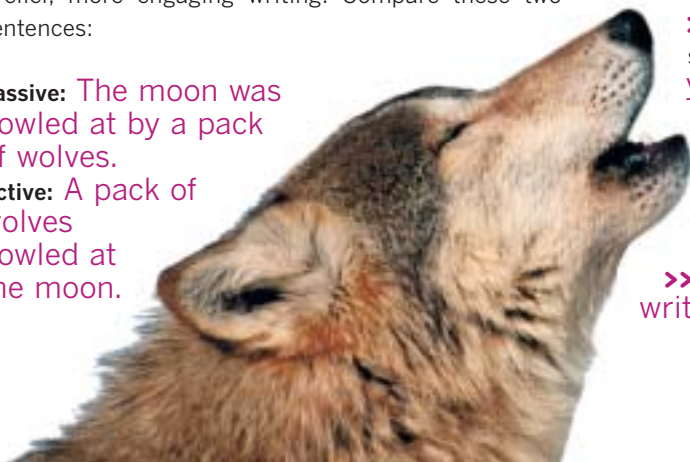
Example: It was agreed that school should start an hour later.

Who agreed? Board members? Students? Teachers? The passive voice leaves your reader guessing.

3 While the passive voice puts the emphasis on the receiver of the action, the active voice puts the emphasis on the doer of the action. This results in livelier, more engaging writing. Compare these two sentences:

Passive: The moon was howled at by a pack of wolves.

Active: A pack of wolves howled at the moon.



4 Using the active voice encourages the use of more dynamic verbs.

Passive: The reason Jenny quit was that she was talked into it by Lauren.

Active: Lauren persuaded Jenny to quit.

> PASSIVE IS NOT ALWAYS BAD

There are situations when the passive voice is preferable to the active voice. Use the passive voice when you want to emphasize the recipient of the action, or when the actor is obvious, unimportant, or unknown:

Example 1: Hillary was re-elected.

Example 2: My bicycle was stolen.

The passive voice is often appropriate for scientific or technical writing:

Example: Twelve cc's of acid were added to the beaker.



The key to using the passive voice is to use it deliberately. Don't use the passive voice because it's easier than determining who or what the actor is. But if the actor is truly unknown, or if naming the actor really won't clarify your meaning, then you may want to use the passive voice.

> HOW TO SPOT THE PASSIVE VOICE

Look for sentences that have both a form of "to be" and the past participle of the main verb. Some other possible indicators of the passive voice include:

>> The phrase "by the" after the verb: Adam was attacked by the gerbil.

>> Endings that turn verbs into abstract nouns, such as -ion, -ing, and -ment: Assessment of your skills was performed during the first week of training.

>> "It is . . . that" construction: It is clear that the wrong decision was made.

>> The absence of a subject: The report was written. (By whom?)

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SKILL DRILL

ACTIVE OR PASSIVE? Determine whether each of the sentences below is in the active or passive voice. Write "A" (active) or "P" (passive) on the lines provided.



- _____ 1. The Pacers were defeated on Wednesday night.
- _____ 2. Sharon has forgotten her locker combination.
- _____ 3. The old factory was destroyed by a fire on Thursday night.
- _____ 4. The dog has been walked.
- _____ 5. Kevin received a DVD player for his birthday.



MAKE IT ACTIVE. Change each of the sentences below from the passive to the active voice. Keep in mind that you may need to invent a subject for some sentences, and feel free to replace any verbs that you find dull.

- 1. The parking lot was covered with garbage.

- 2. Having seen the movie again, the story was easier to understand.

- 3. I am delighted by Zachary's sense of humor.

- 4. The night sky was filled with glittering stars.

- 5. The winner of the essay contest will be announced at noon.



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