

Passive Voice

Passive voice: The subject of the sentence is not the acting agent of the sentence. It is a style error, not a grammatical error. Passive voice sentences show no ownership.

Active voice: The subject of the sentence is also the acting agent. Active voice sentences provide more clear and concise images.

Diagnosis: In each sentence identify the subject, the action, and the acting agent. If the subject is not the acting agent, the sentence is written in passive voice.

Example: The money was donated by an anonymous source.

Subject: Money

Action: Donating

Acting Agent: Anonymous source.

The sentence is passive because the subject and acting agent are not the same.

Prescription: Write sentences so that the subject of the sentence is also the acting agent.

Correction: An anonymous source donated the money.

Subject: Anonymous source

Action: Donating

Acting Agent: Anonymous source

The sentence is written in active voice because the subject and acting agent are the same.

Identify the subject, action, and acting agent in the following sentences to determine if they are written in active or passive voice. Change passive voice sentences to active voice sentences.

1. Fifty-two pages were read by the students.

Subject:

Action:

Acting Agent:

Active or Passive:

Correction:

2. Martha Stewart was found guilty by the jury.

Subject:

Action:

Acting Agent:

Correction:

3. The Vote for Change Concert was attended by many politically minded people.

Subject:

Action:

Acting Agent:

Correction:

4. Elvis was seen at Bronco Beach.

Subject:

Action:

Acting Agent:

Correction:

Answer Key:

1. *Subject:* Pages
Action: Reading
Acting Agent: Students
Correction: Students read fifty-two pages.

2. *Subject:* Martha Stewart
Action: Finding
Acting Agent: Jury
Correction: The jury found Martha Stewart guilty.

3. *Subject:* Concert
Action: Attending
Acting Agent: People
Correction: Many politically minded people attended the Vote for Change Concert.

4. *Subject:* Elvis
Action: Seeing
Acting Agent:?????
Correction: ***No correction is necessary since no acting agent is present. If an active voice is desired, add an acting agent. Example:*** Elvis was seen at Bronco beach by Gandhi. ***Change to:*** Gandhi saw Elvis at Bronco Beach.

Reflection

Passive voice was an interesting Grammar Rx lesson in that it was about a style preference and not a grammatical error. It fit well with the material in Grammar Alive and Image Grammar that highlighted the notion that writers can, and should, use unconventional sentence structure for effect. The fact that nothing was “wrong” with the samples allowed for some discussions.

Overall the lesson went well. Since it followed the same format as previous Grammar Rx lessons, there was no need for direct instruction on what to do with the sample items. Paula mentioned that she liked the concrete plan for identifying the subject, action, and acting agent in each sentence. I have found this to be a technique that works well with middle school students. It allows the students to see the relationships clearly. Bryce picked up the concept of using sample items that are meaningful to the students.

If I were to teach the lesson again, perhaps I would spend more time going through the answer key with the group. Because they are highly skilled writers, I simply asked Bryce, Paula, and Elizabeth if they had questions about the topic. They seemed to have a firm grasp on the concept, so it was not necessary to go further in depth. Either I taught it well, or they were already familiar with passive voice.