



A Teacher's Guide to Passive Voice

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Voice: The voice of a verb tells whether the subject of the sentence performs or receives the action. In English there are two voices, passive and active.

Active Voice: In active voice, the subject performs the action expressed by the verb:
The student wrote a song.

Passive Voice: In passive voice, the subject receives the action expressed by the verb:
A song was written by the student.

A passive construction occurs when you make the *object* of an action into the *subject* of the sentence.

Why was the road crossed by the chicken?

To Fix: Put the doer up front

Why did the chicken cross the road?

A little clearer explanation: In a passive sentence the subject receives the action; it does not do it.

Ways to spot passive voice: Form of *to be* + past participle (usually words that end in -ed)= passive voice

Now you try:

Change the passive into active.

Passive: The dog was kicked by the boy.

Active:

Passive: The accident was seen by Betty.

Active:

Passive: Larry was told by the teacher to be quiet.

Active:

Why not to use passive voice: What it can do to your writing

Passive voice is technically not a grammatical error but it is also usually not recommended for the following reasons:

***Sometimes the reader has to guess what you mean**

~passive voice may not always be clear about who or what is doing the action

Example: (passive) A new [drug] control system was set up. (By whom?)

(active) The Lao People's Revolutionary Party gradually set up a system of drug control laws.

***Sloppy or lazy thinking is assumed about the writer**

~ assumption that those who use passive voice have not thought through the process they are discussing

Examples: The working class was marginalized.
 African Americans were discriminated against.
 Women were not treated as equals.

Assumes writer does not know a lot about their topic

When to use passive voice:

*Call attention to receiver of the action rather than the performer:

The professor was hit by three snowballs.

* Point out the receiver of the action when performer is unknown or unimportant:

A love letter was slipped under the door.

The signs will be posted.

*Avoid calling attention to the performer of the action:

The fines will be collected on Monday.

*Also used to ignore responsibility

Mistakes were made. (Instead of Bob made mistakes)

Cigarette ads were designed to appeal especially to children (Instead of We designed cigarette ads to appeal to children- passive voice places burden on ad)

How can we explain this to our students?

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Students writing will improve because their thoughts will be clearer and more direct, their sentences will be less wordy, and they will know how to put the responsibility on others when things go wrong. ☺

Now you've got it!

