

## Active Voice vs. Passive Voice (#25)

Grammar Girl here.

Today's topic is active voice versus passive voice.

Here's Brian from Iowa:

"It drives me crazy when people write in passive voice. How can I teach people how to tell the difference between passive and active voice and stay away from passive voice? Thanks."

A lot of you have asked me to explain passive voice and how to avoid it.

I'll start with active voice because it's simpler. In an active sentence, the subject is doing the action. A very straightforward example is the sentence "Steve loves Amy." Steve is the subject, and he is doing the action: he loves Amy, the object. Another example is the title of the Marvin Gaye song I Heard It through the Grapevine. I is the subject, the one who is doing the action. I is hearing it, the object of the sentence.

In passive voice the target of the action gets promoted to the subject position. Instead of saying, "Steve loves Amy," I would say, "Amy is loved by Steve." The subject of the sentence becomes Amy, but she isn't doing anything. Rather, she is just the recipient of Steve's love. The focus of the sentence has changed from Steve to Amy. If you wanted to make the title of the Marvin Gaye song passive, you would say It Was Heard by Me through the Grapevine, not such a catchy title anymore.

A lot of people think that all sentences that contain a form of the verb to be are in passive voice, but that isn't true. For example, the sentence "I am holding a pen" is in active voice, but it uses the verb am, which is a form of to be. The passive form of that sentence is "The pen is being held by me."

Another important point is that passive sentences aren't incorrect; it's just that they often aren't the best way to phrase your thoughts. Sometimes passive voice is awkward and other times it's vague.

When you put sentences in passive voice, it's easy to leave out the agent doing the action. For example, "Amy is loved" is passive. The problem with that sentence is that you don't know who loves Amy. In fact, politicians often use passive voice to intentionally obscure the idea of who is taking the action. Ronald Reagan famously said, "Mistakes were made" when referring to the Iran-Contra scandal. Other examples of passive voice for political reasons could include "Bombs were dropped" and "Shots were fired." Since I started writing this episode, I've become more aware of passive voice, and it seems as if I hear politicians use it every day.

So, these are some of the reasons to avoid passive voice: the form can lead to awkward sentences and obscured meaning. Also, passive voice is wordy. You can tighten up your writing a lot if you use active voice more often than passive.

<http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/active-voice-versus-passive-voice.aspx>

**Directions:** The verbs in the following sentences are in the passive voice. On your own paper, rewrite each sentence in the active voice. If the sentence doesn't have a doer, supply one.

**Example:** The letter was sent earlier. *Jeannie sent the letter earlier.*

1. The trees were stripped last month.
2. The computers were shipped early in September.
3. The letter was written by my brother.
4. The old car was driven by my brother.
5. The school bell was repaired in September.
6. This man has been stabbed.
7. My shoes were taken to the shoemaker.
8. The trees were uprooted by the storm.
9. The bookcase was stained a dark walnut.
10. The flowers were planted in March.

### *Now Write it Wrong: Changing Active Voice to Passive Voice*

**Directions:** The verbs in the following sentences are in the active voice. On your own paper, rewrite the sentences, changing the verbs to passive voice.

**Example:** My neighbor alerted the police. *The police were alerted by my neighbors.*

1. The janitor fixed the classroom door.
2. Mr. Smith took a photograph of me.
3. All the students passed the algebra test.
4. Our basketball team lost twenty percent of its games.
5. The contractor renovated our kitchen.
6. Jane Beard composed the school song.
7. She broke two keys on her typewriter.
8. My father took pictures at the picnic.
9. The zookeeper loves the animals.
10. The judge took Tom's license.