

Active and Passive Voice

Explanation and Exercise

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The active voice

- When a sentence is in the active voice, the subject of the sentence is the actor.
- Examples:
 - The boy kicked the ball.
 - The lawyer argued the case.

The passive voice

- When a sentence is in the passive voice,
 - The subject is the receiver of the action.
 - The complete verb has at least two words. One of them is a form of “to be” (*be, is, am, are, was, were, been*).
- Examples:
 - The ball was kicked.
 - The books were shelved by the librarian.

Problems with the passive voice

- It is vague, because no actor is identified.
- It is wordier than the active voice, especially if the writer names the actor in a prepositional phrase at the end of the sentence.
- Examples:
 - **The argument was made.** (But who made it?)
 - **The argument was made by Becker.** (This is wordy and less direct than the active voice version of the same idea: **Becker made the argument.**)

Can I ever use the passive voice?

- Of course you can use the passive voice. It's a standard English form.

When should I use the passive voice?

- You may want to use the passive voice when the actor is unknown or unimportant:

The clerk was just shot! (You don't know who shot the clerk).

- You may want to deflect attention from an actor:

Then the guard was stabbed. (Your client is accused of stabbing the guard, but you want to deflect attention away from your client.)

What guidelines should I follow in deciding whether to use the passive voice?

1. Determine whether a sentence is in the passive voice.
2. If it is, mentally change it into the active voice.
3. Ask yourself if the active version is better: Is it more direct? Less wordy? Clearer? Stronger? If so, you should probably change it to the active voice.
4. Then ask if you have a reason for using the passive voice. For example, do you want to deflect attention away from an actor? If so, you may want to keep the sentence in the passive voice.
5. Most of your sentences should be in the active voice.

Exercise

Determine whether each sentence in **yellow** is active or passive. Then decide whether the voice should be changed.

1. This result can be achieved in several ways.

Active or passive? Should this be changed?

1. Passive. (Check the criteria on Slide 3). This sentence should be changed to the active voice.

Explanation: It's probably better to name an actor here. With no actor named, the sentence is vague. *Who* will achieve the result? The sentence might be rewritten this way:

Congress can achieve this result in several ways.

2. The court held that the plaintiff had no claim.

Active or passive? Should this be changed?

2. Active. Keep this sentence in the active voice.

Explanation: In each clause in the sentence, the subject is the actor (*court* and *plaintiff*).

Changing the sentence to the passive would create this awkward sentence:

It was held by the court that no claim was had by the plaintiff.

3. The most important drafting skill is an understanding of the elements of a contract.

Active or passive? Should this be changed?

3. Active. The subject—*skill*—is the actor in a broad sense, because this sentence expresses a state of being. Note that the verb—*is*—has only one part, while passive verbs have at least two parts. (See Slide 3).

You can leave this sentence as it is.

4. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here

Active or passive? Should this be changed?

4. Active. This sentence from the *Gettysburg Address* contains some unusual, rather formal structures. But it is a strong piece of writing that still works well, partly because it is in the active voice.

5. An incorrect analysis of the pending issue has been advanced.

Active or passive? Should this be changed?

5. Passive. (See criteria on slide 3). This sentence should be changed.

Explanation: This is a classic example of an ineffective use of the passive voice. The sentence is vague and indirect. What is this writer talking about? Who advanced the analysis?

Here's one way to rewrite the sentence:

The prosecutor has analyzed this issue incorrectly.

6. The criminal was involuntarily committed to a mental health hospital.

Active or passive? Should this be changed?

6. Passive. (Check the criteria on Slide 3). You may decide to leave this sentence in the passive voice.

Explanation: The subject of the sentence -- *criminal* -- is not the actor; someone else committed him or her to the hospital—maybe someone in the legal system following a trial. But you may believe it is not important who did the committing.

If the actor *is* important, you could rewrite the sentence this way: **The criminal's own mother committed him to a mental health hospital.**

7. If there was physical injury here, it was incidental to the emotional distress.

Active or passive? Should this be changed?

Active. This sentence can be left as it is, although it might be condensed: **Any physical injury here was incidental to the emotional distress.**

Explanation: This begins with an expletive construction, *there was*. It is in the active voice. Expletive constructions lack a strong verb and can sometimes be profitably changed, but at times they are good choices.

A side note: Some of the best novels in English begin with expletive constructions: “It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.” (1984).

8. Many lawyers are called upon to use negotiation skills at some point.

Active or passive? Should this be changed?

8. Passive. (Check the criteria on Slide 3). This should probably be changed.

Explanation: The writer may believe that *who* calls on the lawyer to use these skills is not important. But the sentence would still be stronger in the active voice, with “lawyers” as the actor:

Many lawyers use negotiation skills at some point.