

## Using Active Voice

In most types of writing, readers prefer direct, concise and energetic prose. Passive writing, on the other hand, is weak, lacks energy, or is excessively wordy. Passive writing takes several forms, most of which use a form of the verb "to be." Simply looking for "is," "was," "are," and "were" will help you spot passive sentences. Once you've identified a passive sentence, it helps to know the different types of passive writing and ways to correct it.

### Passive Voice

"Jack hit the ball" is an example of a sentence in the active voice. The subject of the sentence – Jack – performs an action on the direct object – the ball. Passive voice occurs when the writer switches the subject and the direct object: "The ball was hit by Jack." Notice that this kind of inversion always requires a "to be" verb and an extra preposition ("by").

In simple sentences like these, writing actively may seem easy. Staying in the active voice becomes harder in sentences describing objects or physical settings ("The window was closed," for example). In general, you can remove the passive voice from your writing by searching for telltale compound verbs ("was hit," "were fed"). Then change the sentence to active by identifying the "actor" in the sentence and placing it as the grammatical subject.

Passive voice may be appropriate when the actor is unknown or unimportant. This is particularly true in scientific writing, where you will often encounter sentences such as: "Three ounces of arsenic were fed to the mice."

### Overuse of the Progressive Tense

Writers use the progressive tense to show continuing action: "**I was running** along the edge of the golf course when a ball hit me on the head." This is an appropriate use of the progressive tense, but using it too frequently makes writing difficult to read. The next sentences in this story should be in simple past tense: "I fell to the ground and two golfers ran toward me" instead of "I was falling to the ground and two golfers were running toward me."

### Overuse of "It is..." and "There are..."

Known as **expletive constructions**, "It is" and "There are" at the beginning of sentences postpone the sentence subject and are most often unnecessary. Beginning the sentence with the subject is usually clearer and more direct. Instead of "There are six thousand students who attend National University," write "Six thousand students attend National University."

Expletive constructions can emphasize the sentence subject: "It is this kind of construction that bothers English instructors." Use this technique sparingly!

The following exercise will help you learn how to deploy more active constructions in your writing.

### Active/Passive Worksheet

Change the following sentences from passive to active. You may need to supply a new subject to make the sentence active.

Example: The ball was hit by Jack.

\_\_\_\_\_ Jack hit the ball. \_\_\_\_\_

1. Mistakes were made.
2. In a scientific study, it was discovered that four out of five students use the Tutoring Center.
3. The buffalo were removed from Yellowstone by park rangers.
4. I was driving to the airport when I saw the accident ahead. I was slamming on the brakes but my car wasn't stopping in time.
5. Then I was taken to the hospital by an ambulance.
6. It is the overuse of the passive voice that makes prose difficult to read.
7. When I arrived at the office today, the doors were locked.
8. Hanging from the ceiling was an old chandelier.
9. I was wanting to attend National University.
10. There are many students in this class who could benefit from using more active writing.