

Style Rule #6— Minimizing and Avoiding Unnecessary Passive Voice

Refer to Pages _____ in your handbook on the basics of Passive Voice.

The passive voice is the termite of your writing style. We never see it, because we speak in the passive voice much of the time. Because we do not see it, we think our writing is strong. However, the passive voice weakens writing the way termites weaken wood. Writing and revision gives us the opportunity to really examine our sentences for the passive voice and correct them before it hurts our arguments.

Here is a simple way to remember what the passive voice is:

If the subject of your sentence is not doing anything—but instead an action is happening to it—then the sentence is passive.

Passive Example: The ball was thrown. (*The ball is not doing anything—someone or somethin is doing to it.*)

Or The ball was thrown by the boy. (*The ball is still not doing anything, the boy is doing something—throwing—it. However, the boy is not the subject, the ball is*)

How to fix the Passive voice:

Figure out what is actually doing the action and make that thing or person the subject of the sentence. When you fix the passive voice, you make it ACTIVE—the subject does something, and because of that, your writing becomes stronger, smoother, and more efficient.

Active Example: The boy threw the ball. (*The boy does the action—and the TO BE verb disappears.*)

Why is passive voice bad?

It makes the writing sluggish, and usually uses more words. As a result, you write a lot, but say a little. Active voice, however, keeps things efficient (you write a little, and say a lot).

Note the difference between these two sentences:

Passive: Your writing will be weakened by passive voice. (8 words)

Active: Passive voice will weaken your writing. (6 words)

Also, Passive voice allows people to get away with things by avoiding blame:

Passive: Mistakes were made. (3 words, unclear who made the mistakes)

Active: I made mistakes. (3 words, but we know who is responsible)

The Exception(s): If you want to highlight how someone or something is helpless—that is they CANNOT do anything—then passive accomplishes this task.

Passive for sympathy: The dog was hit by the car. (*we feel sorry for the dog—our attention is on the dog, and we feel bad because the dog didn't do anything to get hit.*)

Active: The car hit the dog. (*the reader's attention is on the car, not the dog, so we may feel bad, but we don't feel as bad.*)

So how do I recognize the Passive Voice?

Here is a clue: Many sentences that use the passive voice rely on a form of the verb infinitive TO BE: [am, are, is, was, were, be, been]. This rule is not 100%, but it is enough to help you recognize and minimize the Passive Voice by changing it to active.

Passive	Active
Students are shown how to write. Students are shown how to write by teachers.	Teachers show student how to write. OR Students learn how to write.
The ring was bought by the man for his wife.	The man bought the ring for his wife.
The cake will be eaten after dinner.	The guests will eat the cake after dinner.
The car is driven by Tony Stewart.	Tony Stewart drives the car.
I am upset by the loss	The loss upset me.
They were kept out by the gates.	The gates kept them out.

However, TO BE is a clue, not a guarantee, that something is passive. Also, note that passive is a STYLE issue, not a grammar issue. Passive is grammatically correct, but not strong style. It is not a matter of right or wrong, but one of correct, better, or even better. Style is what give writing an emphasis or feeling to it. Good arguments use strong, streamlined, active voice sentences.

Not passive:

The dinner was cheap. (Cheap is not a verb, this sentence simply describes the dinner).

Grammatically correct but passive:

The cheap dinner was bought by my boss. (Cheap describes the dinner, but the dinner is not doing anything. Who or what is doing the buying?)

Correct and active (better):

My boss bought the cheap dinner for us. *OR* My boss bought us the cheap dinner.