

PASSIVE VOICE

Identifying Passive Voice

The passive voice of a verb always consists of a form of the helping verb **be** plus the past tense of the main verb: **was told, are examined, has been broken**. Although sometimes appropriate, passive verbs are generally considered weak and wordy. Active voice is much more effective and clear and is usually preferred.

S V

Active: Bill **threw** the ball to his son.

We know from reading this that Bill is the one who threw the ball. The person doing the action--Bill-- is the subject of the sentence. He is the agent doing the action of the verb. Passive voice changes that direct action.

S V

Passive: The ball **was thrown** by Bill to his son.

Drawbacks of Passive Voice

Notice that the basic information is the same. Passive voice may not change the meaning of the sentence. But here the subject--the ball--is not doing the action. The ball is not throwing anything; it is passively **being thrown**. Also notice how awkward the sentence is when we stick Bill at the end, after the ball has been thrown? Not all passive voice is awkward. We can make this sentence smoother and less wordy by eliminating some information.

Passive: The ball **was thrown**.

Smoother, maybe. But we're missing the important parts of the sentence --Bill and his boy -- so we have to add a prepositional phrase (by Bill) to show who the agent was. One problem with passive voice is that we end up with a sentence where nobody is doing what **has been done**. Bureaucrats love this. They can announce actions without being responsible for them.

Passive: Tuition **was raised**. (Who raised it? Only the shadow knows.)

Passive: Permission **has been denied**. (By whom? Where do I complain?)

Benefits of Passive Voice

Passive voice is appropriate when we don't know who performed an action.

Passive: Tony **was injured** in a hit and run accident. (We don't know who hit Tony.)

It's also appropriate when we want to emphasize the deed rather than the doer.

Passive: Lisa **was saved** from serious injury by her seat belt.

If, however, I'm trying to pass a seat belt law, I'd emphasize the heroic seat belt.

Active: A seat belt **saved** Lisa from serious injury.

Practice

Identify and change the passive voice verbs to active voice. Notice which ones are easiest or hardest to change.

1. The gun was shot by Tina.
2. The soup was prepared by the cook.
3. The empty house will be torn down by the city.
4. Tony has been shocked by that wire twice today.
5. Her new car was stolen right out of the garage.
6. The team was given a standing ovation.
7. The horse was being ridden by Julia when I drove up.
8. The moving van was loaded by four perspiring men.
9. A tray of glasses was dropped by the new waiter.
10. A bomb was found in the suitcase by airport security.
11. The widow's groceries are paid for by her neighbors.
12. His right leg was broken in two places.
13. Every garment is inspected by a supervisor.
14. My house was vandalized last night.
15. Jeff is often irritated by his neighbor's noisy parties.

Answers

1. Tina shot the gun.
2. The cook prepared the soup.
3. The city will tear down the empty house.
4. That wire has shocked Tony twice today.
5. [Someone] stole her new car right out of the garage.
6. [Someone] gave the team a standing ovation.
7. Julie was riding her horse when I drove up.
8. Four perspiring men loaded the moving van.
9. The new waiter dropped a tray of glasses.
10. Airport security found a bomb in the suitcase.
11. The neighbors pay for the widow's groceries.
12. [He] broke his right leg in two places. (or maybe an attacker did it?)
13. A supervisor inspects every garment.
14. [Someone] vandalized my house last night.
15. His neighbor's noisy parties often irritate Jeff.

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