

8

Prefer active verbs.

As a rule, choose an active verb and pair it with a subject that names the person or thing doing the action. Active verbs express meaning more emphatically and vigorously than their weaker counterparts—forms of the verb *be* or verbs in the passive voice.

PASSIVE The pumps *were destroyed* by a surge of power.

BE VERB A surge of power *was responsible* for the destruction of the pumps.

ACTIVE A surge of power *destroyed* the pumps.

Verbs in the passive voice lack strength because their subjects receive the action instead of doing it. Forms of the verb *be* (*be, am, is, are, was, were, being, been*) lack vigor because they convey no action.

Although passive verbs and forms of *be* have legitimate uses, if an active verb can carry your meaning, use it. Even among active verbs, some are more active—and therefore more vigorous and colorful—than others. Carefully selected verbs can energize a piece of writing.

- The goalie crouched low, ^{swept} ~~reached~~ out his stick, and ^{hooked} ~~sent~~ the rebound away from the mouth of the net.



ESL

Some multilingual speakers avoid the passive voice even when it is appropriate. For advice on transforming an active sentence to the passive, see 62c.

GRAMMAR CHECKERS are fairly good at flagging passive verbs, such as *were given*. However, because passive verbs are sometimes appropriate, you—not the computer program—must decide whether to make a passive verb active.

8a Use the active voice unless you have a good reason for choosing the passive.

In the active voice, the subject does the action; in the passive voice, the subject receives the action (see also 62c). Although both voices are grammatically correct, the active voice is usually more effective because it is simpler and more direct.

ACTIVE Hernando *caught* the fly ball.

PASSIVE The fly ball *was caught* by Hernando.

In passive sentences, the actor (in this case, Hernando) frequently disappears from the sentence: *The fly ball was caught*.

In most cases, you will want to emphasize the actor, so you should use the active voice. To replace a passive verb with an active alternative, make the actor the subject of the sentence.

^{A bolt of lightning struck the transformer.}

- ~~The transformer was struck by a bolt of lightning,~~ plunging us

into darkness.

The active verb (*struck*) makes the point more forcefully than the passive verb (*was struck*).

- ~~The settlers stripped the land of timber before realizing the~~

^{The land was stripped of timber before the settlers realized}

the consequences of their actions.

The revision emphasizes the actors (*settlers*) by naming them in the subject.

^{We did not take down the}

- ~~The Christmas decorations were not taken down until~~

Valentine's Day.

Often the actor does not appear in a passive-voice sentence. To turn such a sentence into the active voice, the writer must decide on an appropriate subject, in this case *We*.

Appropriate uses of the passive

The passive voice is appropriate if you wish to emphasize the receiver of the action or to minimize the importance of the actor.



Clarity

APPROPRIATE PASSIVE

Many native Hawaiians *are forced* to leave their beautiful beaches to make room for hotels and condominiums.

APPROPRIATE PASSIVE

As the time for harvest approaches, the tobacco plants *are sprayed* with a chemical to retard the growth of suckers.

The writer of the first sentence wished to emphasize the receiver of the action, *Hawaiians*. The writer of the second sentence wished to focus on the tobacco plants, not on the people spraying them.

In much scientific writing, the passive voice properly emphasizes the experiment or process being described, not the researcher.

APPROPRIATE PASSIVE

The solution *was heated* to the boiling point, and then it *was reduced* in volume by 50 percent.

ON THE WEB

Rules on avoiding the passive voice have sparked debates. If you're interested in learning why, go to dianahacker.com/rules and click on

- **Language Debates**
- **Passive voice**

8b Replace be verbs that result in dull or wordy sentences.

Not every *be* verb needs replacing. The forms of *be* (*be, am, is, are, was, were, being, been*) work well when you want to link a subject to a noun that clearly renames it or to an adjective that describes it: *History is a bucket of ashes. Scoundrels are always sociable*. And when used as helping verbs before present participles (*is flying, are disappearing*) to express ongoing action, *be* verbs are fine: *Derrick was plowing the field when his wife went into labor*. (See 29a.)

If using a *be* verb makes a sentence needlessly dull and wordy, however, consider replacing it. Often a phrase following the verb will contain a word (such as *violation*) that suggests a more vigorous, active alternative (*violate*).

Active verbs

vb
8b

- Burying nuclear waste in Antarctica would ^{violate} ~~be in violation of~~ an international treaty.

Violate is less wordy and more vigorous than *be in violation of*.

- When Rosa Parks ^{resisted} ~~was resistant to~~ giving up her seat on the bus, she became a civil rights hero.

Resisted is stronger than *was resistant to*.

EXERCISE 8-1

Revise any weak, unemphatic sentences by replacing *be* verbs or passive verbs with active alternatives. Some sentences are emphatic; do not change them. Revisions of lettered sentences appear in the back of the book. Example:

The ranger doused the campfire before giving us
~~*The campfire was doused by the ranger before we were given*~~

a ticket for unauthorized use of a campsite.

- a. The Prussians were victorious over the Saxons in 1745.
- b. The entire operation is managed by Ahmed, the producer.
- c. Yellow flags were thrown down by all the referees.
- d. At the crack of rocket and mortar blasts, I jumped from the top bunk and landed on my buddy below, who was crawling on the floor looking for his boots.
- e. There were shouting protesters on the courthouse steps.
1. Just as the police were closing in, two shots were fired by the terrorists from the roof of the hotel.
2. Her letter was in acknowledgment of the student's participation in the literacy program.
3. The bomb bay doors rumbled open and freezing air whipped through the plane.
4. Listening to the music of Charlie Parker and John Coltrane was my motivation to take up the saxophone.
5. The only responsibility I was given by my parents was putting gas in the brand-new Mitsubishi they bought me my senior year.