

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE

A verb is in the *active* voice when it expresses an action performed *by* its subject. A verb is in the *passive* voice when it expresses an action performed *upon* its subject or when the subject is the result of the action.

ACTIVE VOICE The car ^{hit} a tree. [subject acting]

PASSIVE VOICE The tree ^{was hit} by a car. [subject acted upon]

All transitive verbs (those that take objects) can be used in the passive voice. Instead of the usual situation in which the verb expresses an action performed by the subject and affecting the object, a passive construction has the subject receiving the action. Compare the following sentences.

ACTIVE VOICE In the novel the spy ^{stole} the secrets.

PASSIVE VOICE In the novel the secrets ^{were stolen} by the spy.

In the novel the secrets ^{were} stolen.

To form the passive construction, the object of the active sentence is moved ahead of the verb and becomes the subject. A form of *be* is added to the verb, and the subject of the active sentence is either expressed in a prepositional phrase or dropped.

Notice that in the passive voice the main verb is always a past participle, and the tense is expressed by an appropriate form of *be*.

ACTIVE The plumber **fixed** the leaky pipe.

PASSIVE The leaky pipe **was fixed** by the plumber.

ACTIVE The captain usually **reads** the lineup.

PASSIVE The lineup is usually **read** by the captain.

The Retained Object

Active sentences that have direct objects often have indirect objects as well. When they do, either the direct or indirect object can become the subject in a passive construction:

ACTIVE The company ^{sent} us a letter.

PASSIVE We ^{were sent} a letter (by the company).

PASSIVE A letter ^{was sent} us (by the company).

In both of the passive sentences above, one of the objects has been made the subject and the other continues to function as a complement of the verb. In the first sentence the direct object is retained as a complement; in the second it is the indirect object that is retained. The object that continues to function as a complement in a passive construction is called a *retained object*.

Use of Passive Voice

The choice between the active or passive voice is usually a matter of taste, not of correctness. However, it is important to remember that a passive verb is usually less forceful than an active one and that a long succession of passive verbs usually produces an awkward effect.

WEAK PASSIVE The event was completed when a triple somersault was done by Mario.

ACTIVE Mario completed the event by doing a triple somersault.

WEAK PASSIVE Steady rains were hoped for by all of us, but a hurricane was wanted by none of us.

ACTIVE All of us hoped for steady rains, but none of us wanted a hurricane.

SUCCESSION OF PASSIVES I *was asked* by Ms. Long to visit her animal shelter for unwanted pets. Rows of cages *had been placed* along both sides of a room. First a large parrot *was shown* to me. Elsewhere, a scrawny puppy *was being comforted* by an assistant. Ms. Long said that so many unwanted pets *had been brought* to her, it was difficult for all of them to *be housed* there. It *was agreed* by us that the responsibility of owning a pet *should be understood* by people before a pet *is bought*.

26i. Use the passive voice sparingly. Avoid weak and awkward passives. In the interest of variety, avoid long passages in which all the verbs are passive.

There are, however, some qualifications of this general rule which should be mentioned. The passive voice is particularly useful in two common situations.

(1) Use the passive voice to express an action in which the actor is unknown.

EXAMPLE All the tickets **had been sold** many days ago.

(2) Use the passive voice to express an action in which it is desirable not to disclose the actor.

EXAMPLE Poor judgment **was used** in making this decision.

In some instances the passive voice is more convenient and just as effective as the active voice. The following passive sentences are entirely acceptable.

The laser **was invented** by an American.

The space travelers **were cheered** by the crowds and **praised** by the press. Ivy Swan, who **is known** by all for her songs, **has been emulated** by many young, hopeful singers.

Remember, however, that the active voice is generally stronger than the passive and less likely to get you into stylistic difficulties.