

Turning Passive Verbs into Active Verbs

When the subject performs the action expressed in the verb, the verb is in the active voice.

When the subject receives the action of the verb, the verb is in the passive voice.

Example of Active Voice

The hunter shot the bird.

The subject *hunter* performs the action expressed in the verb *shot*.

Example of Passive Voice

The bird was shot by the hunter.

The subject *bird* receives the action of being *shot*.

In general, using the active voice makes for cleaner and clearer writing. It is clearer because it is more specific, and cleaner because the active voice usually uses fewer words.

Example

The table was set by George. (six words)

Revised Example

George set the table. (four words)

Example

The dinner was cooked by Eileen. (six words)

Revised Example

Eileen cooked the dinner. (four words)

Example

The sugar crop on the coast was damaged by stormy weather. (eleven words)

Revised Example

The stormy weather damaged the sugar crop on the coast. (ten words)

Example

The game was won by the Seattle Mariners. (eight words)

Revised Example

The Seattle Mariners won the game. (six words)

Exercise 1

Select the letter for the sentence that uses the active voice in each of the sentence pairs in this exercise.

1. a. Escobar held the phone.
b. The phone was held by Escobar.
2. a. The night was filled by the sound of the stray cat's howling.
b. The sound of the stray cat's howling filled the night.
3. a. The pilot was asked by the control tower to delay the flight.
b. The control tower asked the pilot to delay the flight.
4. a. The surprise party was organized by Jamie's mother.
b. Jamie's mother organized the surprise party.
5. a. Many consider Alex to be the best shortstop in the league.
b. Alex is considered by many to be the best shortstop in the league.

Active voice is clear and concise, two trademarks of good writing. In some situations, however, passive voice is acceptable. For example, when the actor who performed the action is not known, or when the writer does not want to reveal the actor for effect, it is appropriate to use the passive voice.

Example

My backpack was stolen.

In this sentence, the person who stole the backpack is not known, so the passive voice is acceptable.

Passive voice is correct in some other situations as well. Occasionally, a sentence constructed in the passive voice will be shorter than an active construction.

Example of Active Voice

The creators of the computer game told the players to download their personal statistics before they began to play. (nineteen words)

Example of Passive Voice

The players were told to download their personal statistics before they began to play. (fourteen words)

Example of Active Voice

The framer framed the house, the roofers put the roof on, and the construction crew made it ready to be occupied. (twenty-one words)

Example of Passive Voice

The house was framed, roofed, and made ready to be occupied. (eleven words)

The choice whether to use active or passive voice is a matter of style rather than correctness. However, if the passive voice is used too often, it makes for weak and awkward passages. In the same way that good writing has variety in aspects like sentence length and word choice, it also should have variety in its voice. Long passages in which all the verbs are passive will make your readers look for another way to spend their time.

Example in the passive voice

Sam was brought by his mother, Joan, for his first haircut. His hair was cut by the barber, and then he was given a lollipop by the receptionist. Sam was nervous when he saw the scissors so close to his head, but he was reassured by his older brother that haircuts are no big deal.

Example in the active voice

Sam's mother, Joan, brought him for his first haircut. The barber cut his hair, and then the receptionist gave him a lollipop. Sam was nervous when he saw the scissors so close to his head, but his older brother reassured him that haircuts are no big deal.

Revising the Passive Voice

To turn a passive sentence into an active sentence, the subject of the verb must perform the action. Move the object of the passive sentence so that it appears before the verb and becomes the subject. Eliminate the form of the verb *to be*, and turn the subject of the passive sentence into the object.

Imagine that the verb is the middle of a seesaw. The subject of a passive sentence is on the left and the object is on the right. To turn the sentence into an active sentence, they must switch places.

Example of passive construction

The mail was opened by my daughter.

Subject verb object

Switch the places of the subject and object to eliminate the form of “to be.”

Example of active construction

My daughter opened the mail.

Subject verb object

Example of passive construction

Bernie was taught to read by his first grade teacher.

Subject verb object

Example of active construction

His first grade teacher taught Bernie to read.

Subject verb object

Exercise 2

Revise the following sentences to change the passive voice to the active voice. Write the revised sentence on the lines provided.

6. A firefly was captured by the boy.

7. The lasagna was prepared by Dan.

8. A memo was delivered to me by the director of marketing.

9. He was ordered to move by his superior.

10. Several novels were read by the book club.

Revising State-of-Being Verbs

State-of-being verbs are forms of the verb “to be.” The table at the bottom of this page lists all of the state of being verbs. Unnecessary state-of-being verbs slow the action of a sentence. To keep your reader involved and to

keep your sentences as concise as possible, revise state-of-being verbs whenever possible. The following paragraph demonstrates the overuse of state-of-being verbs.

Example

The fall foliage in New England was beautiful. The trees were orange and yellow. At the top of a hill was one particularly interesting tree. Its leaves were shaped like hearts and were deep red. The sun was bright and the air was cold, but it was a good day to hike.

Revised Example

The fall foliage in New England looked beautiful. Orange and yellow leaves filled the trees. One particularly stately tree—with deep red, heart-shaped leaves—stood at the top of a hill. An ineffective, but bright, sun made it a perfect day for hiking.

SUBJECT	PRESENT	PAST	PAST PARTICIPLE	FUTURE	CONDITIONAL
I	am	was	have been	will be	would be
You	are	were	have been	will be	would be
He/She/It	is	was	has been	will be	would be
We	are	were	have been	will be	would be
You (plural)	are	were	have been	will be	would be
They	are	were	have been	will be	would be

The second paragraph moves along more quickly and conveys the feeling in a livelier manner. It is also more concise, trimming the first paragraph from fifty-three words to forty-three.

Turning Verbs into Nouns

Occasionally, it may be tempting to turn verbs into nouns as a way of sounding more “academic” or “intellectual,” but it usually makes the writing less clear. Using “sophisticated” vocabulary does not improve upon good, clear writing.

Example with verbs as nouns

The front office made the decision to begin a feasibility study regarding the development of a better mousetrap.

Revised example

The front office decided to study the feasibility of developing a better mousetrap.

Adding Unnecessary Auxiliary Verbs

Auxiliary verbs such as *have, had, is, are, was, were, will, would* and so on are unnecessary if they don't help convey the meaning of the sentence. Eliminate them if the meaning of the sentence stays the same.

Example

Every day we would eat donuts before practice.

Revised example

Every day we ate donuts before practice.

Example

George had gone to get coffee, but he had forgotten his money.

Revised example

George went to get coffee but forgot his money.

Exercise 3

Revise the following sentences to eliminate unnecessary state-of-being and auxiliary verbs. Write the new sentence on the line provided.

11. The test was on the Civil War.

12. I had hoped to find my necklace by the swimming pool.

13. We would run twice around the track during our lunch break.

14. If you want to be eating ice cream, let's go get some.

15. I had had the flu, but now I am being healthy with what I eat.

Starting with *there* or *it*

Sentences sometimes unnecessarily begin with phrases like *there is*, *there was*, *there were*, *it is*, and *it was*. The use of these phrases delays the beginning of the idea in a sentence. Eliminating them during revision will make your writing clearer and more direct.

Example

There are a number of people who can touch their noses with their tongues.

Revised example

A number of people can touch their noses with their tongues.

Example

It was too rainy of a day for soccer.

Revised example

The day was too rainy for soccer.

Example

There were eight or nine children home with the flu.

Revised example

Eight or nine children were home with the flu.

Use Lively Verbs

Clear writing means the reader understands what you mean. Many verbs do not clearly express the idea of the sentence as well as a livelier verb could.

Example

One cook does the prep work, one is the line cook who uses the barbecue, and one does the desserts.

Revised example

One cook prepares the food to be cooked, one grills the food to perfection, and one cuts desserts and arranges them on the plate.

Use lively verbs to be specific and entertaining. Why should someone *walk* when they can *stroll, meander, stride, clamber, skip, hike, saunter, amble, march, totter, toddle, or stagger*?

Exercise 4

Revise the following sentences to turn nouns into verbs and to eliminate *there* or *it* at the beginning of the sentences. Write the revised sentence on the lines provided.

16. There are twenty different drills on sale at the hardware store.

17. We did a study on frogs in the rain forest.

18. It was too cold of a day to go hiking.

19. The development of the child was faster than the other second grade students.

20. There can be no other way to climb the mountain.
