

Why and When Passive Voice

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ABSTRACT: The question "When and why passive voice should be preferred or applied?" is the aim of this paper. Having investigated different texts and contexts, the categorization of different types of texts which necessitate the usage of Passive voice are introduced in the present paper. The difference in applying passive voice merely reflects the different natures of content, purpose, and audience. Furthermore, some associated information are presented as follow: The most common form of the passive in English is known as the short passive or agent less passive and the proportion of passive verbs varies with the type of prose may show far more passives than narrative prose. On one hand, the necessity of having a good reason for using a passive voice is referred to in the paper such as when the agent is obvious, unknown, or unnecessary, when the speaker/writer wants to emphasize a result and also when the agent is very general. On the other hand, the passive should be recognized as a quite decent and respectable structure of English grammar. Also some verbs and verb forms which cannot be used in passive voice are mentioned here. The fact found via the paper is that not only is the passive voice a significantly frequent option in modern prose, but it is also often the clearest and briefest way to convey information.

Keywords: passive voice; subject; agent; active voice; object.

INTRODUCTION

First, it is important to know what passive and active sentences are before comparisons can be drawn. Passive and active sentences are incredibly useful to the study of persuasive and/or emotive writing, and are a typical feature of newspaper reports. It is the writer's deliberate variation between these sentences that allows them to mold their reader to interpret their words in their desired way. If the writer uses the passive form ("The girl was helped"), he clearly aims for his audience to immediately sympathize with the girl and the way she's been treated or a example of the girl being helped. This is why the distinction between passive and active sentences is so necessary in newspaper reports, as they help to convey the meaning.

To determine whether or not something is an agent, it is important to note where the blame is placed. If the word(s) in question put the blame on someone/thing, or can begin with "by...", then it is an agent, and the sentence is passive. Sentence pattern of active and passive sentences are as follow:

Active sentence = S.V.O., S.V.Adv., or S.V.Complex

Passive sentence = S.V., or S.V.Agent

Although this paper has focused on the reason of application of passive voice and the place where it is specially used, it's a fact that over the past several years, there has been a movement within many science disciplines away from passive voice. Scientists often now prefer active voice in most parts of their published reports, even occasionally using the subject "we" in the Materials and Methods section.

Passive in general

Alternatively, passive sentences can omit the agent and merely consist of subject and verb: "The girl (S) was helped (V)". Active sentences can be used to foreground the person or thing that causes the events, shaping the reader's opinions towards them. They could also be useful to allow the reader to see something from a person's perspective

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- Active sentences are commonly used in newspaper articles to make the writer seem objective and non-intrusive, as they make the text appear factual and detached, although in reality they often also help to disguise subjective influences on the reader.
- Note the reason the writer uses a passive or active sentence.

Common Usages of Passive

The most common form of the passive in English is the *short passive* or *agent less passive*: a construction in which the agent (that is, the performer of an action) is not identified. Example: "Mistakes *were made*." (In a *long passive*, the object of the verb in an active sentence becomes the subject.) Though style guides often discourage use of the passive, the construction can be quite useful, especially when the performer of an action is unknown or unimportant.

Passive voice verbs are used in writing much more often than in speech, and they are used in some types of writing much more often than in others. Passives are used more in journalism (newspapers, magazines) than in fiction (novels, stories), but most journalists and fiction writers use far more active than passive sentences. However, passives are very common in all types of scientific and technical writing. Scientific articles often contain more passive than active sentences. English students should learn how to use the passive voice for explaining processes and for business situations. Here are some examples:

My friend painted my house in summer. -> My house was painted in summer.

Somebody drove this new bus. -> This new bus was driven by our boss.

A number of people in Iran have produced the anti-cancer medicine. -> The anti-cancer medicine has been produced in Iran.

The passive voice is used when focusing on the person or thing affected by an action.

- The Passive is formed: Passive Subject + To Be + Past Participle

The heart hospital was established in 2013.

- It is often used in business when the object of the action is more important than those who perform the action.

For Example:

He has trained more than thirty champions in the recent five years. Changes to: Over 30 champions have been trained in the recent five years.

- If the agent is important (the person, company or thing that does the action), "by" is used.

For Example: Great Kourosh captured present Turkey in 136 A.D. Changes to: Present Turkey was captured by great Kourosh in 136 A.D.

In Defense of the Passive Voice

The proportion of passive verbs varies with the type of prose: scientific prose, for instance, may show far more passives than narrative prose. But to point this out is not to denigrate scientific writing. The difference merely reflects the different natures of content, purpose and audience. Not only is the passive voice a significantly frequent option in modern prose, but it is also often the clearest and briefest way to convey information. . .

'Indiscriminate slandering of the passive voice ought to be stopped. The passive should be recognized as a quite decent and respectable structure of English grammar, neither better nor worse than other structures. When it is properly chosen, wordiness and obscurity are no more increased than when the active voice is properly chosen. Its effective and appropriate use can be taught.' (Jane R. Walpole, "Why Must the Passive Be Damned?" College Composition and Communication, 1979)

True Passives, Semi-Passives, and the Passive Gradient

The statistic from corpus analyses that four-fifths of passive sentences in texts occur without the agentive *by*-phrase makes nonsense out of deriving passives from actives. In the active subjects are obligatory; there can be no active sentences without a subject. So where do all these passives with no agent come from whereby the agent is unknown? Not from an underlying active, obviously. It is common practice to assume a 'dummy' subject in such cases, equivalent to 'someone,' i.e. underlying *My house was burgled* is the sentence *Someone burgled my house*. But that is stretching a point beyond credibility.' (Randolph) Quirk et al. (in *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, 1985) attempt to get over this problem by presenting a 'passive gradient' and the notion of *semi-passive*, exemplified by the following sentences:

- 1) This violin was made by my father.
- 2) This conclusion is hardly justified by the results.
- 3) Coal has been replaced by oil.
- 4) This difficulty can be avoided in several ways.
- 5) We are encouraged to go on with the project.
- 6) Leonard was interested in linguistics.
- 7) The building is already demolished.
- 8) The modern world is getting more highly industrialized and mechanized.
- 9) My uncle was/got/seemed tired.

The dotted line indicates the break between real passives and semi-passives. Those above the line are real passives, those below the line are increasingly remote from the ideal passive with a unique active paraphrase, and are not real passives at all--they are semi-passives. (Christopher Beedham, *Language and Meaning: The Structural Creation of Reality*. John Benjamins, 2005)

Rise of the 'Get'-Passive

The passive in English is usually formed with the verb *to be*, yielding 'they were fired' or 'the tourist was robbed.' But we also have the 'get' passive, giving us 'they got fired' and 'the tourist got robbed.' The get-passive goes back at least 300 years, but it has been on a rapid rise during the past 50 years. It is strongly associated with situations which are bad news for the subject--getting fired, getting robbed--but also situations that give some kind of benefit. (They got promoted. The tourist got paid.) However, the restrictions on its use may be relaxing over time and get-passives could get a whole lot bigger. (Arika Okrent, "Four Changes to English So Subtle We Hardly Notice They're Happening." *The Week*, June 27, 2013)

When to Use the Passive Voice in Journalistic Writing

Lauren Kessler and Duncan McDonald (in *When Words Collide*, 8th ed., Wadsworth, 2012) offer two situations in which the passive voice must be used. First, passive voice is justified if the receiver of the action is more important than the creator of the action. They use this example:

A priceless Rembrandt painting *was stolen* from the Metropolitan Museum of Art yesterday by three men posing as janitors.

In this case, the Rembrandt should remain the subject of the sentence even though it receives the action. The painting is obviously more important--more newsworthy--than the three men who stole it. Kessler and McDonald's second reason for using passive voice is if the writer has no choice. That's when the writer does not know who what the actor, or the creator of the action, is. The example they use:

The cargo *was damaged* during the trans-Atlantic flight.

The remaining of the food will be decayed out of refrigerator.

The bottle of the vinegar was exploded under

Air turbulence? Sabotage? Was the cargo strapped in properly? The writer doesn't know, so the voice must be passive. (Robert M. Knight, *A Journalistic Approach to Good Writing: The Craft of Clarity*, 2nd ed. Iowa State Press, 2003)

When do we use passive voice?

In some sentences, passive voice can be perfectly acceptable. You might use it in the following cases:

1. The actor is unknown:

The cave paintings of Lascaux were made in the Upper Old Stone Age. (We don't know who made them.)

All the airplane and ships over Bermuda triangle were suddenly cleaned from radar screen. (We don't know who cleaned them.)

2. The actor is irrelevant:

An experimental solar power plant will be built in the Australian desert. (We are not interested in who is building it.)

The airplane will be surely repaired in the first opportunity and you'll fly on time. (We do not care who will repair it.)

3. You want to be vague about who is responsible:

Mistakes were made. (Common in bureaucratic writing!)

The coast of the sea is polluted with oil.

4. You are talking about a general truth:

Rules are made to be broken. (By whomever, whenever.)

Some dead fishes were sunk on water. (By whomever)

5. You want to emphasize the person or thing acted on. For example, it may be your main topic:

Insulin was first discovered in 1921 by researchers at the University of Toronto. It is still the only treatment available for diabetes.

Poldokhtar Bridge was partially ruined during Iraq war. It was one of the Iranians' historical works.

6. You are writing in a scientific genre that traditionally relies on passive voice. Passive voice is often preferred in lab reports and scientific research papers, most notably in the Materials and Methods section:

The sodium hydroxide was dissolved in water. This solution was then titrated with hydrochloric acid.

The butter left on the table was melted and deformed after one hour. It was frozen once more when it was dropped into the icy water.

In these sentences you can count on your reader to know that you are the one who did the dissolving and the titrating or freezing. The passive voice places the emphasis on your experiment rather than on you.

The butter left on the table of the kitchen was melted and deformed but having been dropped into the icy water it was gradually frozen once more.

7. There may be no obvious agent/actor to be mentioned:

A very huge stone was separated from the mountain and fall down on their bus.

The pint of vinegar was suddenly exploded in the yard.

In brief, you should *not* use passive voice unless you have a good reason.

Passive voice with no replacement

1. Passive voice is often used when the agent (the doer of an action; the subject of an active verb) is obvious, unknown, or unnecessary:

'Oranges are grown in California.' As answer to: What is grown in California?

'Toyotas are made in Japan.' As answer to: Where is Toyotas made?

'Her purse was stolen.' As answer to: What is stolen?

The only answer to the above questions can be passive sentences that are exemplified. In fact, we are usually expected to reply what we are asked unless we want to give extra or unnecessary information to our questioner that is abnormal (Even if we know the doer/subject). Let alone we do not have any information about the doer/actor of the action to mention. In other words, whether the writer/speaker of the above-mentioned instances knows the doer/actor or not he/she has preferred to choose the passive structure to pay attention to just the receiver of the action.

2. Passive voice is often used when the agent is known, but the speaker/writer doesn't want to mention it:

'She was given bad advice.'

'A mistake has been made.'

When there is no reason or willing to introduce the doer /actor of the action how can we replace the passive sentence with an active one? While the doer/actor of the action is exposed to a danger, risk, loss, blame or even shame the speaker or writer may see expedience not to mention him /her, how can we replace the passive sentence with an active one?

3. Passive voice is often used when the speaker/writer wants to emphasize a result:

Several thousand people were killed by the earthquake.

The captain of ShicagoBulls team was received a red card at the middle of the game.

One of the routine ways of emphasizing on a proper thing especially in writing and also in speaking with putting stress on the first syllable of the emphasized word is bringing the very word at the beginning of the sentences. If we tend to use a grammatically correct sentence in such circumstances we would better apply a passive sentence.

When should we avoid passive voice?

These are some common intransitive verbs: appear, arrive, come, cry, die, go, happen, occur, rain, sleep, stay, and walk. These verbs *cannot* be used in passive voice. In all only verbs that take an object can be used in the passive voice

Perfect progressive verb forms are generally used in active voice only. That is, these are good English sentences:

- ACTIVE: They have been speaking English.
- ACTIVE: They had been speaking English.
- ACTIVE: They will have been speaking English.
- But sentences like these are rarely used:
- PASSIVE: English has been being spoken.
- PASSIVE: English had been being spoken.
- PASSIVE: English will have been being spoken.

- But sentences like these are rarely used:
- PASSIVE: English has been being spoken.

Passive sentences can get you into trouble in academic writing because they can be vague about who is responsible for the action:

Both Othello and Iago desire Desdemona. She is courted. (Who courts Desdemona? Othello? Iago? Both of them?)

Academic writing often focuses on differences between the ideas of different researchers, or between your own ideas and those of the researchers you are discussing. Too many passive sentences can create confusion:

Research has been done to discredit this theory. (Who did the research? You? Your professor? Another author?)

Some students use passive sentences to hide holes in their research:

The telephone was invented in the nineteenth century. (I couldn't find out who invented the telephone!)

Finally, passive sentences often sound wordy and indirect. They can make the reader work unnecessarily hard. And since they are usually longer than active sentences, passive sentences take up precious room in your paper:

Since the car was being driven by Michael at the time of the accident, the damages should be paid for by him.

We have not passed that subtle line between childhood and adulthood until we move from the passive voice to the active voice--that is, until we have stopped saying 'It got lost,' and say, 'I lost it.' (Sidney J. Harris)

Weeding out passive sentences

If you now use a lot of passive sentences, you may not be able to catch all of the problematic cases in your first draft. But you can still go back through your essay hunting specifically for passive sentences. At first, you may want to ask for help from a writing instructor. The grammar checker in your word processor can help spot passive sentences, though grammar checkers should always be used with extreme caution since they can easily mislead you. To spot passive sentences, look for a form of the verb to be in your sentence, with the actor either missing or introduced after the verb using the word by.

Poland was invaded in 1939, thus initiating the Second World War.

Genetic information is encoded by DNA.

The possibility of cold fusion has been examined for many years.

Try turning each passive sentence you find into an active one. Start your new sentence with the actor. Sometimes you may find that need to do some extra research or thinking to figure out who the actor should be! You will likely find that your new sentence is stronger, shorter, and more precise:

Germany invaded Poland in 1939, thus initiating the Second World War.

DNA encodes genetic information.

Physicists have examined the possibility of cold fusion for many years.

CONCLUSION

In English language there are some sentences which necessarily must be replaced by the structure of passive voice because active voice cannot cover the writer /speaker's aim, tendency, willing or request. In other words, the attention of creator of the sentence focuses on the receiver of the sentence hence the only helpful structure which grammatically emphasize on the receiver can play the desired role is passive voice. Furthermore, in some other cases there is basically no actor /doer to place at the beginning of the sentence and form an active voice. In fact such circumstances mean that the skeleton of the active sentence lacks its basic part that is 'doer/actor' and is not capable of taking its grammatical shape and as a result the only probable replacement is a passive voice. Another reason for taking advantage of passive structure can be the fact that when the doer/actor of the sentence is generally known or not worth mentioning, a passive voice is naturally preferred. moreover, there are some conditions in which it is t the writer /speaker to choose the type of structure but he/she is imposed to answer in a way that the questioner requires. For example, when you are asked 'what is stolen?' you have no choice except answering the question by pointing exactly to the thing which is stolen not more or less.

On the other hand we encounter with the verbs which may not be applied in passive voice such as appear, arrive, come, cry, die, etc. due to their meaning and lack of object or receiver of the action. Meanwhile, necessity of introducing, mentioning or emphasizing on the actor/doer of an action is the other reason for avoiding the usage of passive voice.

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