

Tightening Passive Sentences

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Sentences in English can usually be expressed in either of two forms, active or passive.

	<i>agent</i>	<i>action</i>	<i>object</i>
ACTIVE	The horse	pulled	the cart.
	<i>object</i>	<i>action</i>	<i>agent</i>
PASSIVE	The cart	was pulled	by the horse.

Active sentences present events in a natural order: an **agent** (or “doer”) does something to an **object**. Passive sentences reverse this natural order, confusing the agent-object relationship. For this reason, passive sentences are longer, less direct, and sometimes harder to understand than their active counterparts. During revision, you can often sharpen your writing by changing passive sentences into active forms.

How to Revise Passive Sentences

1) First see whether the passive sentence contains an agent. Ask who or what did the action of the sentence. If you find an agent, move it to the front part of the sentence and move the object (what the agent acts on) to the last part of the sentence.

<i>object</i>	<i>action</i>	<i>agent</i>
The ball	was hit	by Mary.

<i>agent</i>	<i>action</i>	<i>object</i>
Mary	hit	the ball.

Ask who or what did the hitting. The answer is Mary. Notice that you will also have to cut down the verb (here was is deleted) and get rid of words such as by that are used in passive sentences to mark the agent. When you finish your revision, read it aloud to see that it makes sense and means what you want it to.

2) Sometimes a **passive sentence** will not contain an **agent**. To revise such sentences, you must select the appropriate agent and insert it at the front of the

sentence, moving the object to the last part of the sentence and changing the verb:

Passive, with no agent:

Congress was intentionally misled.

Revision, using an appropriate agent:

Oliver North intentionally misled Congress.

Of course, if you cannot think of an appropriate agent, then the sentence will simply have to remain passive. But using active sentences in which agents are clearly identified can often help make your writing stronger and more direct.

For practice, see exercises on “tightening passive sentences.”