

Writing Clear Sentences: Use Active Voice

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Write sentences in the active voice because they are usually clearer than sentences in the passive voice. A sentence is in the active voice when the grammatical subject performs the action described by the verb; the subject is the “actor”—the person or thing performing the action. In other words, the sentence is in the natural order.

<u>Subject</u>	<u>Verb</u>	<u>Object</u>
The girl	threw	the ball.

The sentence is in the passive voice when the subject “passively sits there” having the action done to it. In passive sentences, the “actor,” or the person or thing performing the action, is not the grammatical subject. The natural order is reversed.

<u>Subject</u>	<u>Verb</u>	<u>Indirect Object</u>
The ball	was thrown	by the girl.

Ask yourself who performs the action described by the verb. Then put that “actor” before the verb.

Examples:

Passive: Romeo and Juliet was written by Shakespeare.

Active: Shakespeare wrote Romeo and Juliet.

Passive: John was constantly criticized by his grandfather.

Active: His grandfather constantly criticized John.

Sometimes you must name the actor who performs the action because she/he/it is not expressed in the passive sentence.

Passive: The students were told to be quiet.

Active: The teacher told the students to be quiet.

Try to use the active voice unless

- the performer of the action is unimportant, or

- you need to connect sentences by showing how sentences in a passage relate to each other, but you can only do so by using passive voice.

Exercise A:

Change these sentences from passive to active voice.

1. The baseball trophy was presented by the coach.
2. The birthday card was signed by all his coworkers.
3. The sprinklers were turned on when the gardener started his yard work.
4. Income taxes were increased too much.
5. The tests were distributed before the students began their discussion.
6. A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star.
7. Your figures have been reanalyzed by the accountant to determine where the errors occurred.
8. The plight of the homeless can be demonstrated by a clear description of their daily activities.
9. The carrots were eaten by the hungry rabbit.
10. The college art awards were won by Francesca and Peter.

Exercise B:

Revise one of your essays so that all the sentences are in active voice. Discuss your revisions with your instructor.