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THE PASSIVE VOICE

Passive and Active Voices

Verbs are also said to be either *active* (The executive committee approved the new policy) or *passive* (The new policy was approved by the executive committee) in voice. In the active voice, the subject and verb relationship is straightforward: the subject is a be-er or a do-er and the verb moves the sentence along. In the **passive voice**, the subject of the sentence is neither a do-er or a be-er, but is acted upon by some other **agent** or by something unnamed (The new policy was approved). Computerized grammar checkers can pick out a passive voice construction from miles away and ask you to revise it to a more active construction. There is nothing inherently wrong with the passive voice, but if you can say the same thing in the active mode, do so (see exceptions below). Your text will have more pizzazz as a result, since passive verb constructions tend to lie about in their pajamas and avoid actual work.

We find an overabundance of the passive voice in sentences created by self-protective business interests, magniloquent educators, and bombastic military writers (who must get weary of this accusation), who use the passive voice to avoid responsibility for actions taken. Thus "Cigarette ads were designed to appeal especially to children" places the burden on the ads — as opposed to "We designed the cigarette ads to appeal especially to children," in which "we" accepts responsibility. At a White House press briefing we might hear that "The President was advised that certain members of Congress were being audited" rather than "The Head of the Internal Revenue service advised the President that her agency was auditing certain members of Congress" because the passive construction avoids responsibility for advising and for auditing. One further caution about the passive voice: we should not mix active and passive constructions in the same sentence: "The executive committee approved the new policy, and the calendar for next year's meetings was revised" should be recast as "The executive committee approved the new policy and revised the calendar for next year's meeting."

Take the quiz (below) as an exercise in recognizing and changing passive verbs.

The passive voice does exist for a reason, however, and its presence is not always to be despised. The passive is particularly useful (even recommended) in two situations:

- *When it is more important to draw our attention to the person or thing acted upon:* The unidentified victim was apparently struck during the early morning hours.
- *When the actor in the situation is not important:* The aurora borealis can be observed in the early morning hours.

The passive voice is especially helpful (and even regarded as mandatory) in scientific or technical writing or lab reports, where the actor is not really important but the process or principle being described is of ultimate importance. Instead of writing "I poured 20 cc of acid into the beaker," we would write "Twenty cc of acid is/was poured into the beaker." The passive voice is also useful when describing, say, a mechanical process in which the details of process are much more important than anyone's taking responsibility for the action: "The first coat of primer paint is applied immediately after the acid rinse."

We use the passive voice to good effect in a paragraph in which we wish to shift emphasis from what was the object in a first sentence to what becomes the subject in subsequent sentences.

The executive committee approved an entirely new **policy** for dealing with academic suspension and withdrawal. The **policy** had been written by a subcommittee on student behavior. If students withdraw from course work before suspension can take effect, the policy states, a mark of "IW" . . .

The paragraph is clearly about this new policy so it is appropriate that *policy* move from being the object in the first sentence to being the subject of the second sentence. The passive voice allows for this transition.†

Passive Verb Formation

The passive forms of a verb are created by combining a form of the "to be verb" with the past participle of the main verb. Other helping verbs are also sometimes present: "The measure **could have been killed** in committee." The passive can be used, also, in various tenses. Let's take a look at the passive forms of "design."

Tense	Subject	Auxiliary		Past Participle
		Singular	Plural	
Present	The car/cars	is	are	designed.
Present perfect	The car/cars	has been	have been	designed.
Past	The car/cars	was	were	designed.
Past perfect	The car/cars	had been	had been	designed.
Future	The car/cars	will be	will be	designed.

Future perfect	The car/cars	will have been	will have been	designed.
Present progressive	The car/cars	is being	are being	designed.
Past progressive	The car/cars	was being	were being	designed.

A sentence cast in the passive voice will not always include an **agent** of the action. For instance if a gorilla crushes a tin can, we could say "The tin can was crushed **by the gorilla**." But a perfectly good sentence would leave out the gorilla: "The tin can was crushed." Also, when an active sentence with an indirect object is recast in the passive, the indirect object can take on the role of subject in the passive sentence:

Active	Professor Villa gave <u>Jorge</u> an A.
Passive	An A <u>was given</u> to Jorge by Professor Villa.
Passive	Jorge <u>was given</u> an A.

Only transitive verbs (those that take objects) can be transformed into passive constructions. Furthermore, active sentences containing certain verbs cannot be transformed into passive structures. *To have* is the most important of these verbs. We can say "He has a new car," but we cannot say "A new car is had by him." We can say "Josefina lacked finesse," but we cannot say "Finesse was lacked." Here is a brief list of such verbs*:

resemble	look like	equal	agree with
mean	contain	hold	comprise
lack	suit	fit	become

Verbals in Passive Structures

Verbals or verb forms can also take on features of the passive voice. An **infinitive phrase in the passive voice**, for instance, can perform various functions within a sentence (just like the active forms of the infinitive).

- Subject: To be elected by my peers is a great honor.
- Object: That child really likes to be read to by her mother.
- Modifier: Grasso was the first woman to be elected governor in her own right.

The same is true of **passive gerunds**.

- Subject: Being elected by my peers was a great thrill.
- Object: I really don't like being lectured to by my boss.
- Object of preposition: I am so tired of being lectured to by my boss.

With **passive participles**, part of the passive construction is often omitted, the result being a simple modifying **participial phrase**.

- [~~Having been~~] designed for off-road performance, the Pathseeker does not always behave well on paved highways.

**A University Grammar of English* by Randolph Quirk and Sidney Greenbaum. Longman Group: Essex, England. 1993. p. 359. Used with permission.

†*Understanding English Grammar* by Martha Kolln. 4th Edition. MacMillan Publishing Company: New York. 1994. 359.

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