

Standard I-7 Effective Use of Voice

Active and Passive Voice

When working with action verbs, the term **voice** is used to indicate whether the subject is doing the action or whether the action is being done to the subject. This is important because when writing, it is usually better to write in the active voice.

Voice is an issue only when working with action verbs. It's important to remember, however, that some actions cannot be seen. Here are examples of action verbs whose action cannot be seen: *to think, to wish, to hope, to believe, and to plan.*

To determine whether an action verb is in the **active** or **passive** voice, follow this procedure:

Find the action verb in the sentence. Is the subject *doing* this action? If the subject is doing an action, the verb is in the active voice. If an action is being done *to* the subject, the verb is in the passive voice.

Consider these examples:

S V
Frank **ate** the entire pie. *Frank* is the subject of the sentence. Did Frank do something? Yes! He ate the entire pie. The verb is in the **active voice**.

S V
The entire pie **was eaten** by Frank. *Pie* is the subject of the sentence. Did the pie do something? No! Something was done to the pie. It was eaten. The verb is in the **passive voice**.

Although the two examples above communicate the same information, the first is in the active voice and the second is in the passive voice. Notice that the first sentence is shorter and clearer. This is why it is usually better to use the active voice.

The sentence below is in the active voice. Rewrite it to make it passive.

Karen brought all the refreshments. _____

The sentence below is in the passive voice. Rewrite it to make it active.

The new rules were voted on by members of the panel. _____

Notice that when changing the first sentence above to the passive voice, it was necessary to use a helping verb. A helping verb is *always* required when writing in the passive voice.

S V
A sealer **is used** to protect the ceramic tile.

S V
Purple arm **were worn** in support of the project.

Important Note: While, a verb *must* have a helping verb in order to be in the passive voice, all verbs with helping verbs are not passive.

Consider these sentences:

^S Carlos ^V **was riding** his motorcycle from Mobile to Birmingham. The subject (Carlos) was doing an action; therefore, the verb is in the active voice.

^S The motorcycle ^V **was ridden** from Mobile to Birmingham. The subject (motorcycle) is not doing anything. Something is being done to the motorcycle.

Both sentences above have an action verb with a helping verb. The second sentence *has to have* a helping verb in order to be in the passive voice. However, the first sentence—which is in the active voice—also has a helping verb.

Practice 1. Look at the following sentences: Place an A before each sentence in the active voice and a P before each sentence in the passive voice. Think about whether the subject is doing the action (active voice) or whether something is being done to the subject (passive voice).

- _____ 1. Seven new experts were asked to examine the data.
- _____ 2. After the play, Janet drove her brothers home.
- _____ 3. Carla knew the answers to all the questions.
- _____ 4. The plane was grounded by the terrific snowstorm.
- _____ 5. Trina was hoping for a new car for her birthday.
- _____ 6. The clowns danced wildly around the circus ring.
- _____ 7. Please water the plants for me on Tuesday.
- _____ 8. I was asked too many questions about the accident.
- _____ 9. The contract will probably be voided by the new attorney.
- _____ 10. Felix has promised to take us to the fair next month.

Practice 2. In the sentences below, find the verb. Then ask whether the action of the verb is being done *by* the subject or *to* the subject. If the subject is doing the action, the sentence is in the active voice. If the action is being done to the subject, the sentence is in the passive voice.

1. Choose the sentence that is written in the active voice.
 - A. Millions were awed by the daredevil's stunt.
 - B. Plans are being revised by the steering committee.
 - C. After the cooking lesson, the chef will serve lunch.
 - D. Three hundred tickets to the charity concert were sold.

2. Choose the sentence that is written in the active voice.
 - A. He was eating a picnic lunch in the park.
 - B. The children were frightened by the severe thunderstorm.
 - C. There were hundreds of valuable paintings lost in the museum fire.
 - D. The letter is being sent via next-day mail.

3. Choose the sentence that is written in the active voice.
 - A. The chocolate cookies were all eaten before time for the party.
 - B. Mother has been greatly surprised by my improved grades.
 - C. We should give the admission ticket to the gentleman by the door.
 - D. All prescription drug warnings must be taken seriously.

4. Choose the sentence that is written in the passive voice
 - A. Levi was writing a letter to his pen pal.
 - B. The video was apparently damaged during shipment.
 - C. Hang your jacket in the hall closet.
 - D. Hoping for bread crumbs, the ducks swam close to the tourists.

5. Choose the sentence that is written in the passive voice.
 - A. Martha may be thinking about her ailing aunt.
 - B. Hundreds of fans waited by the dressing room door.
 - C. Did you buy that new album at a local store?
 - D. The criminal was apprehended by the sheriff's department.

Standard I-7

Effective Use of Voice Quiz

1. Choose the sentence that is written in the active voice.
 - A. Jose' offered an elderly man his seat on the bus.
 - B. The security guard was alerted by his suspicious behavior.
 - C. The candidate's plane will be met by many political supporters.
 - D. The speaker may be asked questions after his formal presentation.

2. Choose the sentence that is written in the active voice.
 - A. There were several important messages left on your machine.
 - B. Hopefully, the gifts were insured for their full value.
 - C. Alice was waiting for me by the water fountain.
 - D. Harold was hit on the forehead by a foul ball.

3. Choose the sentence that is written in the active voice.
 - A. The beached whale was rescued by concerned marine biologists.
 - B. After resting from her walk, Lillian watched her favorite program.
 - C. A huge chocolate cake was delivered to Maya's birthday party.
 - D. Has the letter been typed correctly on the word processor?

4. Choose the sentence that is written in the passive voice.
 - A. Last month, the skating rink was sold to a newcomer.
 - B. Will you drop me by my house after practice?
 - C. The radio announcer reported details of the breaking news story.
 - D. The entire class is planning a surprise party for Mrs. Billingsly.

5. Choose the sentence that is written in the passive voice.
 - A. Please mail that package on your way to the supermarket.
 - B. Sergio is studying English in preparation for his visit to America.
 - C. Walking is recommended as a healthful aerobic exercise.
 - D. Jennifer is wearing a new dress to the party on Saturday.

Standard I-7 Correct Use of Voice

1. Choose the sentence that is written in the active voice.

- A. **Jose' offered an elderly man his seat on the bus.**
- B. The security guard was alerted by his suspicious behavior.
- C. The candidate's plane will be met by many political supporters.
- D. The speaker may be asked questions after his formal presentation.

Active. Subject (Jose') is doing an action (offered.)

Passive. An action (was alerted) is being done to the subject (guard).

Passive. An action (will be met) is being done to the subject (plane).

Passive. An action (may be asked) is being done to the subject (candidate).

2. Choose the sentence that is written in the active voice.

- A. There were several important messages left on your machine.
- B. Hopefully, the gifts were insured for their full value.
- C. **Alice was waiting for me by the water fountain.**
- D. Harold was hit on the forehead by a foul ball.

Passive. An action (were left) is being done to the subject (messages).

Passive. An action (were insured) is being done to the subject (gifts).

Active. Subject (Alice) is doing an action (was waiting).

Passive. An action (was hit) is being done to the subject (Harold).

3. Choose the sentence that is written in the active voice.

- A. The beached whale was rescued by concerned marine biologists.
- B. **After resting from her walk, Lillian watched her favorite program.**
- C. A huge chocolate cake was delivered to Maya's birthday party.
- D. Has the letter been typed correctly on the word processor?

Passive. An action (was rescued) is being done to the subject (whale).

Active. Subject (Lillian) is doing an action (watched).

Passive. An action (was delivered) is being done to the subject (cake).

Passive. An action (has been typed) is being done to the subject (letter).

4. Choose the sentence that is written in the passive voice.

- A. **Last month, the skating rink was sold to a newcomer.**
- B. Will you drop me by my house after practice?
- C. The radio announcer reported details of the breaking news story.
- D. The entire class is planning a surprise party for Mrs. Billingsly.

Passive. An action (was sold) is being done to the subject (skating rink).

Active. Subject (you) is doing an action (drop).

Active. Subject (announcer) is doing an action (reported).

Active. Subject (class) is doing an action (is planning).

5. Choose the sentence that is written in the passive voice

- A. Please mail that package on your way to the supermarket.
- B. Sergio is studying English in preparation for his visit to America.
- C. **Walking is recommended as a healthful aerobic exercise.**
- D. Jennifer is wearing a new dress to the party on Saturday.

Active. Subject (understood *you*) is doing an action (mail).

Active. Subject (Sergio) is doing an action (is studying).

Passive. An action (is recommended) is being done to the subject (Walking).

Active. Subject (Jennifer) is doing an action (is wearing).