

JOHNSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Active Versus Passive Voice

Verbs may be classified as either "active" or "passive," depending upon whether the subject acts (active voice) or is acted upon (passive voice). Because the active voice of the verb is strong and emphatic, it imparts a stronger tone to writing and is generally preferred over passive voice. Passive voice, though less emphatic, can be used legitimately if the writer wants to emphasize the receiver rather than the doer of the action.

Passive: Sausage and eggs were ordered by us for supper. (Weak use of passive voice.)

Active: We ordered sausage and eggs for supper. (Active voice is more effective.)

Passive: The robber was shot through the heart. (Passive voice is effectively used.)

Active: A car going ninety miles an hour crashed into the bridge. (Active voice is needed.)

Passive: The bridge was crashed into by a car going ninety miles an hour. (Passive voice destroys the effect.)

The beginning writer sometimes uses many sentences constructed with ineffective passive voice. The result is a monotonous writing style. Potentially exciting ideas appear lifeless.

Practice Exercises

In the following sentences replace the passive voice with the active voice.

1. Classics like *Wuthering Heights* will always be appreciated by readers.
2. Monica's hair will be styled by Vidal Sassoon during his Kansas City visit.
3. A slinky black dress was bought by Anita for the company party.
4. The radiator of the car became frozen during the cold night.
5. The bone was devoured by the hungry dog.
6. On the opening day of the season a pheasant was shot by my father.
7. The Battle of Waterloo was lost by Napoleon.
8. The priceless vase was broken by my two playful cats.

9. The ambulatory patients were all but neglected by the nurses, who were preoccupied with the critically ill.

10. Bargain-basement prices were paid by Aunt Lucille for the merchandise.

Shifts in sentence structure lead to confusion. If the first clause of a sentence is in the active voice, the second clause should not be in the passive voice unless there is a good reason for the change.

Awkward: After I finally discovered an unsoldered wire, the dismantling of the engine was begun.

Correct: After I finally discovered an unsoldered wire, I dismantled the motor.

Practice Exercises

A. Correct the following sentences, each of which contains an awkward shift from active to passive voice.

1. When a person gets an early start and eats a vitamin-packed breakfast, work is done more efficiently.
2. A skunk sauntered into the garage, and its scent was soon perceived by us.
3. The chef strode into dining area, and the head waiter was admonished by him in front of the guests.
4. The golfer flubbed his shot, and his putter was hurled through the air and into the pond.
5. The hostess summoned the guests, and her sumptuous feast was served.

B. Decide which of the following sentences contain justifiable passive voice. Write a plus mark before those that are effective as written. Correct those that need to be changed.

1. We were to be hanged at midnight.
2. Her book was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.
3. After much debate, the measure was defeated.
4. No moss is gathered by a rolling stone.
5. Next week my vacation will be begun.