



ACTIVE WRITING AND PASSIVE VOICE

Writing that frequently uses “to be” verbs or the passive voice can be dull and lack energy. To make your writing more active, follow these steps.

1. CHANGE “TO BE” VERBS TO MORE ACTIVE VERBS

“To be” verbs = am, is, are, was, were, being, been

Weak verb: The Cubs *were beaten* by the Cardinals.

Active verb: The Cardinals *defeated* the Cubs.

The second sentence is clearer and uses a more active verb.

Weak verb: He *is* a good piano player.

Active verb: He *plays* the piano well.

2. NAME THE ACTOR PERFORMING THE ACTION

No actor: There *was singing* at the baseball game.

This sentence does not name WHO was singing. To make the sentence more active, make sure to name WHO performs the action.

Active verb that names the subject: The *crowd* sang “Roll out the Barrel” at the baseball game.

Here, the crowd is the subject/actor. Notice that the sentence is clearer and provides more detail.

3. CHANGE PASSIVE VOICE TO ACTIVE VOICE

Using the passive voice weakens your writing because the subject is the receiver of action rather than the actor. Passive voice can also make your writing wordy. To make your writing more energetic and clear, use the active voice.

Passive Voice: The doll was bought by the child.

Here, the child is the actor because the child is doing the buying. To make a sentence active, place the actor/subject before the verb.

Active Voice: The child bought the doll.

Notice that this sentence in active voice is clearer and also requires only five words whereas the example in passive voice required seven words to make its point.

Passive Voice: The students were learning from the instructor how to locate topic sentences.

Active Voice: The instructor taught the student to locate topic sentences.

To change passive to active voice, also make sure to name the person/thing performing the action in your sentences.

Passive Voice with no actor: The data was calculated at the lab.

This sentence lacks WHO finished the test. To make the sentence more active, make sure to name WHO performs the action.

Active Voice with actor: The *scientists* calculated the data at the lab.

4. WHEN IS PASSIVE VOICE APPROPRIATE?

At times, you may not know the person/thing performing the action; therefore, passive voice may be appropriate.

Passive Voice with no actor: The glasses on the windowsill were broken when I came home.

The speaker does not know who broke the glasses; therefore, it is fine to use passive voice here.

If you want to emphasize that someone or something is the victim of an action, you may use passive voice.

Passive voice with actor: The deer was hit by the car.

This sentence emphasizes that the deer is the victim; however, you could change the sentence into active voice by simply placing the actor before the verb.

Active voice with actor: The car hit the deer.