Passive Voice

Video 1: Overview
- Introduction to Passive and Active Voice
- Definition of Voice
    - Active
    - Passive

Video 2: Construction of the Passive and Active Voice
- Transitive Verbs
- Intransitive Verbs
- Verbs that can act as either
- Formation of Passive Voice
- Alternative Passive constructions
    - Get
    - Have

Video 3: Usage
- General Preference for Active Voice
- Use of Passive
    - Use in different genres
    - Flow of information
    - Register

Video 1: Introduction to Passive and Active Voice

Many student writers are taught "Don't use passive voice!" "Use active verbs!"- advice that is reinforced by word processing programs such as Microsoft word.

But what is "voice" and why are writers admonished to avoid using the passive voice?   In this tutorial we will discuss what "voice" is, how the active and passive voices are constructed and then examine circumstances in which one might be selected over the other. It's true that in English college writing active verbs are generally preferred. However, this is not always the case, and it's up to the conventions of the specific discipline to decide which voice best meets its needs.

Passive and Active Voice Defined

In addition to tense, number, etc., all verbs are marked for either the active or passive voice.

In the active voice, the subject performs the action:

Ivy rode her bike.

Jacky broke the window.

These sentences can be thought of as answers to the questions "What did Ivy do?' or "Who broke the window?" The focus in an active construction is on the subject and the action.

In the passive voice, the subject receives the action:

The bike was ridden [by Ivy].

The window was broken [by Jacky].

These sentences can be thought of as answers to the questions: "What happened to the bike?" or "What was broken?" Note that in the passive construction we can eliminate the actor (Ivy and Jacky and Ivy) altogether. The focus in a passive construction is on the receiver of the action (the bike, the window).

Video 2: Construction of the Passive and Active Voice

We need to dip into some grammatical terminology in order to understand which verbs can and cannot be generated in the passive.

English verbs are either *transitive* or *intransitive*:

Transitive verbs take a direct object:

> Chinese immigrants built the transcontinental railroad.
> (But not: Chinese Americans built.)
>
> The candidate's speech persuaded her listeners.
> (But not: The candidate's speech persuaded.)

Intransitive verbs do not take a direct object:

> The total eclipse occurred on a cloudy day. (The eclipse didn't occur something)
>
> The iPhone copyright belongs to Apple. (The copyright didn't belong something)

Formation of Passive Voice

Only transitive verbs, which take a direct object, can be used in the passive voice – the direct object becomes the subject and the receiver of the action; the original subject is introduced in a prepositional phrase with *by*, or even omitted altogether.

> Active: Thieves stole paintings from the Gardner Museum.
> Passive: Paintings from the Gardner Museum were stolen [by thieves].

> Active: James Levine conducted the symphony
> Passive: The symphony was conducted [by James Levine].

Intransitive verbs, which do not take a direct object, cannot be used in the passive construction:

> Active: Spoken language existed before written language.
> But not: Spoken language was existed.

> Active: The most famous San Francisco earthquake happened in 1906.
> But not: The earthquake was happened.

Other Passive Constructions

We have been discussing constructions created with the *be* verb, but passive can also be created using *get* or *have*. "Someone stole Will's bicycle" can be turned into the passive constructions:

> "Will's bicycle *was* stolen."
> "Will's bicycle *got* stolen."
> "Will *had* his bicycle stolen."

> a. *Be* passive – most common in academic writing (and speech).
> b. *Get* passive – seldom used in academic writing and seen as quite informal
> c. *Have* passive – need to make distinction between *experiential* have and *causative* have:
>   i. Experiential: Delia *had* her reservation cancelled (it was cancelled by someone else and happened to her)
>   ii. Causative: Delia *had* her reservation cancelled (she arranged for it to be cancelled).

In American academic writing, the active voice is generally preferred – it focuses on the agent and the action rather than the object, and is more energetic and direct, qualities generally prized in American academic writing. However, there are situations when the passive voice is appropriate. As we've discussed, passive voice focuses on the result, often obscuring the actor, and is used when the actor is less important than the action, or when we wish to hide or ignore the actor. A prominent example of this is in science writing. Historically, writing in the sciences insists on use of the passive, in order to focus on the activity itself, rather than who performed the activity, and to sound more objective. A lab report, for example would say "The solution was poured into the beaker. The beaker was set on a burner." The focus is on what happened to the solution and the beaker, rather than on the agent who performed the actions. Journalistic articles also make frequent use of the passive. "The police were called to the scene where a pedestrian had been hit by a car." In this case who called the police is irrelevant and the focus is on what happened to the pedestrian, rather than on the car's action.

Another consideration when choosing which voice to use is the flow of information. A writer's stylistic preference should be dictated by the presentation and context of information. What information is being highlighted? Which voice will do that most effectively? Excessive use of the passive creates a sense of "wordiness" (as it does indeed require more words) and can make prose feel confusing. A balance of the two voices can create movement and clarity. "Victor Frankenstein created a monster. Its limbs were taken from different bodies and were sewn together to create a gruesome creature." flows better than either "Victor Frankenstein created a monster. He took its limbs from different bodies and sewed it together to create a gruesome creature" or "A monster was created by Victor Frankenstein. Its limbs were taken from different bodies and were sewn together to create a gruesome creature." The latter in particular loses the power of the agency of Frankenstein's action.

Finally, writers need to be attentive to *register* – that is the level of formality – when choosing which construction of the passive to use: to *be*, to *get*, or to *have*. As noted before, *be* passives are the most common, both in writing and speech, while *get* passives are perceived as being highly colloquial and are not appropriate for many genres of prose, especially academic writing. The *have* passive is not uncommon, but it's important to distinguish between the experiential and causative use, as described above. "The US had the treaty revoked" could mean that they revoked it themselves or another country did and it's important for that be clear from the context.

For native speakers of languages other than English, the challenge is not so much the construction of the passive voice, but its usage. Many languages use the passive more frequently, with different verbs, and in different circumstances than English. Being aware of that and being attentive to your immediate purpose for writing will help you choose the voice that best conveys your intentions.

List of References (in MLA style):

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