

Passive Voice

From *Finishing Touches*

- a) The passive is used when it is more important to know what happened than who performed the action.
Chocolate is prepared by the fine grinding of beans. (Chocolate is prepared by people, by workers, by someone. It is not important to know exactly who prepares the chocolate.)
- b) The passive is used when it is not known who performed the action.
Look! The car has been stolen! (The speaker does not know who has stolen the car.)
- c) The passive is used when it is understood who performed the action.
Two teenagers were arrested for stealing cars. (It is understood that the police arrested the teenagers.)
- d) The passive is often used to make impersonal statements.
A decision has been made to raise taxes. (Nobody wants to take responsibility for the decision.)
Mr. Roberts, this report should have been finished yesterday. (The speaker wants to be polite and not accuse Mr. Roberts directly.)
- e) The passive is used in formal language.
In informal language, active forms are more common.
FORMAL: It is not known how it happened.
INFORMAL: We don't know how it happened.

Points to remember

- a) The passive is usually used without a *by*-phrase. The *by*-phrase is used only if it is important to know who performed the action.
Chocolate was brought back to Spain by Hernando Cortes.
- b) The passive can be used only with transitive verbs. (A transitive verb is a verb that is followed by an object.) It is not possible to use the passive with intransitive verbs—for example, *happen*, *disappear*, and *sleep*.
RIGHT: An accident happened.
WRONG: An accident was happened.
- c) Many verbs can be followed by two objects: a direct object and an indirect object. When these verbs are used in the passive, either the direct object or the indirect object can be the subject.
ACTIVE: We will offer this food to all the guests.
PASSIVE: This food will be offered to all the guests.
PASSIVE: All the guests will be offered this food.

(From *Finishing Touches* Vol. A; Samuela Eckstut-Didier; Prentice Hall)

from *Handbook of Good English*

The Handbook of Good English, Edward D. Johnson
(an excellent practical guidebook, available from Mr. MacStein)

Don't be afraid of the passive voice.

First we were shown the wall paintings in the main part of the house, and then we were taken by the guide, who was a very friendly man, over to a refreshment area to wait while the grown-ups went to see some other paintings in a room where we children weren't permitted. Poor little guy—he used the passive for all the *we* clauses, reserving the active for the clauses in which adults were the subject, and some schoolteacher is going to tell him to avoid the weak passive voice and make him rewrite it: *First we saw...then we went to a refreshment area with the guide...a room where we children couldn't go.* The comparatively swashbuckling account that results from the rewriting is not as good, as a child's expression, as the original tale of being taken—not of going—to Pompeii.

Children perceive themselves as objects of action more than as subjects of it, and they use the passive voice even though it takes more words and requires more complicated constructions. It is a feature of their expression. It does sound weak, compared to adult expression, and therefore teachers try to get them away from it. This is not stupid or wrong of the teachers, though a teacher may be insensitive about the problem. Children do have to become adults, do have to learn to think of themselves as the subjects of action rather than the objects of it.

This book is for adults—and we can forget that “Avoid the passive” rule. The passive voice is respectable, is capable of expressing shades of meaning that the active voice cannot express, and is sometimes more compact and direct than the active voice.

The trouble-saving passive

Smith was arrested, indicted, and found guilty, but the money was never recovered has four passive constructions. It is simpler and more direct than *The police arrested Smith, the grand jury indicted him, and the trial jury found him guilty, but the bank never recovered the money*, which has four active constructions. The use of the active voice requires naming the agent of the verb, because in the active voice the agent and the subject are the same, and a verb must have a subject. The passive voice permits not naming the agent of the verb, because the object of the active verb has become the subject of the passive verb. If the agent is too obvious, too unimportant, or too vague to mention, the passive is usually better.

The passive to emphasize the agent

The money was stolen by a man, judging from those footprints emphasizes the agent because it puts it at the end of the clause, which is a prominent position that the reader expects to have some stress. *A man stole the money, judging from those footprints* could be inflected just as clearly in speech by extra emphasis on *man*, but in writing the passive voice supplies the emphasis.

The pussyfooting passive

The money was stolen while Smith was in the vault states the crime and describes the circumstances but avoids making a direct accusation. This tact, frequently desirable in life, would be more difficult to achieve were it not for the passive voice.

The pussyfooting passive is admittedly much abused. *These arrears cannot be overlooked, and if payment is not made promptly, our legal slam will be notified and more rigorous action will be taken* is an offensive, falsely polite way of saying *Our firm cannot overlook these arrears, and if you do not pay us immediately we will take rigorous legal action*. The much shorter *Pay up* is both meant and understood, of course; statements such as this do require a little extra verbiage. They don't require the pussyfooting passive; the active is both clearer and less offensive.

The pussyfooting passive is essential in journalism—often the writer does not know who did something or is not free to say who did it, but he wants to say it was done.