Passive Voice

courtesy of the
Franklin & Marshall College
Writing Center

A sentence is passive if the subject isn’t actually *doing* anything, but just receiving someone or something else’s action

⭐ An Active Sentence: The senior editors distributed the award-winning newspaper to the campus.
   *Note: the subject (the editors) did something— they distributed papers.*

✘ A Passive Sentence: The newspapers were distributed by the senior editors to the campus.
   *Note: In this sentence the subject is the newspaper, but it didn’t do anything; the editors did all the work.*

Passive sentences occur when the writer wants to hide, or doesn’t know, who did the action. For this reason, passive voice is popular in papers that involve citing broadly-researched and accepted facts. For instance,

✘ DNA was found to help law enforcement in the identification of the criminals.

It is hard to say who exactly discovered how useful DNA is to law enforcement, and passive voice hides this obstacle well. A writer doesn’t need to know specifics to avoid passive voice. We can revise the sentence by saying:

⭐ Law enforcement often uses DNA to identify criminals.

Another place where passive voice offers an easy alternative is in formal analytical papers. With these assignments, students can’t use the first person “I” and, as a result, have a hard time expressing their opinion without passive voice. An example:

✘ *The Age of Innocence* is read as a novel of manners because of its detailed description of New York City’s upper-class life during the 1870s.

The student probably wanted to say, “I think *The Age of Innocence* is a novel of manners” but was hesitant to use the first person. Instead, he or she could have said,

⭐ *The Age of Innocence* qualifies as a novel of manners because of its detailed description of New York City’s upper-class life during the 1870s.
Identifying Passive Voice

To identify passive voice, look for these signs:
1. Some form of the verb to be: am, are, is, was, were, etc.
2. A verb phrase, like was won.
3. A past participial form of the verb, like broken or watched.

1. There has been speculation by educators as to the positive effect of a good family environment on educational achievement.

2. The course can be dropped until December 1.

3. Attempts were made on the part of President Nixon’s aides to assert his immunity from a Supreme Court subpoena.

4. Victory was won by paying a great price.

5. The agreement has been broken by the partner.

6. Henrietta took off her wedding ring to do the dishes, and it was accidentally dropped down the drain.

7. Nationwide, declining standardized test scores are reported by public school systems, and some educators claim that the shortcomings of the system are reflected in these scores.

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