

Passive / Active Voice

Switching from passive to active voice can make sentences more clear and interesting.

Passive voice means that you are using some form of the verb “to be” (am, are, is, was, were). The word “being” itself implies a passive state, hence the term “passive voice.”

These verbs indicate a passive state. They are not about “doing” anything. For example:

“I was there” asserts my existence, but little else.

Active voice, on the other hand, indicates some action. These are verbs which indicate “doing” rather than “being.” They make sentences more interesting because we are always interested in what’s going on.

The sentence “I was there for an hour” when rewritten in active voice, can provide the reader with a lot more information.

- (a) “I was there for an hour.” (passive voice)
- (b) “I waited there for an hour.”(active voice)
- (c) “I rested there for an hour.”(active voice)

Both (b) & (c) in the above examples provide the reader information that is more specific and concise, than (a). The use of an action verb carries the meaning that the writer wants to get across.

How to spot passive voice, and change it?

Practice reading for the (am, are, is, was, were) places in writing, and try to get rid of them if you can. You can practice by using any piece of writing. It is not always possible to change sentences from passive to active voice. But in cases where you can make the change, you will find sentences becoming more clear and concise, less wordy, and more interesting.

Example:

- (a) There were many cottages around the lake and on the surrounding hills.
- (b) Cottages dotted the shoreline and countryside.

In the above example, (b) is more clear and concise, and far less wordy.

It’s an easy trick, actually kind of fun once you catch on to it.

The first step is to get rid of “were,” then see how you can rewrite the sentence, using an action verb “dotted,” for example, that preserves the meaning of the sentence.

The following example illustrates the value of using active voice

Example: The goal of learning assistance *is to complement* instruction presented in the classroom by helping you comprehend the concepts introduced to you by your instructor without presenting new ideas to master.

Can be rewritten: Learning assistance *complements* classroom instruction. It does not present new ideas to the student to master.