Active and Passive Voice

**Active Voice**

Active sentences place the focus on who or what is making things happen. Active voice is associated with energetic, definitive writing. Sentences in active voice are usually clearer, more direct, and require fewer words for the same level of description.

In active voice, the subject performs the action expressed by the verb. For example, “The dog bit the boy” fulfills the criteria. The subject, *the dog*, performs the action.

**Passive Voice**

In passive sentences, the focus is on who or what is affected by the verb. For example, in “The boy was bitten by the dog,” the focus of the sentence is on the boy. This type of sentence shifts the focus away from the actor (the subject), and these types of sentences lend themselves to weaker, less informative statements (e.g., “The boy was bitten.”).

Although using passive voice is not grammatically incorrect, it often results in awkward, uninteresting sentences. It is also associated with avoiding assigning responsibility for an action.

Exception: In scientific writing passive voice is accepted because it allows the writer to write without using personal pronouns or the names of particular researchers. Using passive voice supports the appearance of an objective, fact-based paper because it conveys information that is not limited or biased by individual perspectives or personal interests.

**Recognizing Passive Sentences**

Recognizing passive voice sentences is fairly simple; passive voice sentences contain a form of the verb *to be* (i.e., am, is, was, were, are, been). The form of *to be* is then followed by an action verb in past tense (e.g., “was watched” or “were bitten”). The subject performing the action comes after the verb and is introduced with *by* or is omitted completely.

Examples:

Research *will be presented by* Bob at the conference.
The essay that was very good was written by Jane.
The boy was bitten.

Turning Passive Voice into Active Voice

Find the action and subject, and place the subject in front of the action.

Examples:

P: Hamlet was written by Shakespeare.
A: Shakespeare wrote Hamlet.

P: The book is being read by most of the class.
A: Most of the class is reading the book

P: Experiments have been conducted to test the hypothesis.
A: They tested the hypothesis by performing experiments.

P: Your bicycle has been damaged.
A: Someone damaged your bicycle.

P: The brakes were slammed on by her as the car sped down the hill.
A: She slammed the brakes as the car sped down the hill.

P: Action on the bill is being considered by the committee.
A: The committee is considering action on the bill.