

Avoiding the Passive Voice

What is the passive voice?

Grammatically, the passive voice is made up of a form of "to be" and a past participle "is believed," "was seen," "will be considered," "are shown," are all examples of the passive voice. Consider the following sentences:

Passive voice

The notes *were taken* by the student

The bridge *was erected*.

Funds *will be raised* by the class.

Certain demands *were made*.

Active voice

The student took the notes.

The governor erected the bridge.

The class will raise funds.

She made certain demands.

Why should I avoid the passive voice?

The passive voice usually leads to excessively wordy, weak writing. For example, take the following passage:

The shelter is owned by the town, but it is run by members of the humane society and is supported, in part, by funds raised by them. The bulk of the operating funds, however, are supplied by the town. (39 words)

By correcting the passive voice as it appears, we have a more concise, more direct revision:

Although the town owns the shelter and pays most of its operating costs, members of the humane society run the facility and provide some support through fundraising. (27 words)

Another problem with passive voice is that it comes across as vague; it is often the language of politics. Consider the following sentences, which all avoid answering the question "By whom?":

The senator admits some privileges *were abused*.

Because of increased taxation, prices *will be raised* soon.

Appropriate measures *will probably be taken*.

Using the passive voice makes these sentences sound as if they are purposefully evasive, whether this is the writer's intent or not.

Should I always avoid the passive voice?

The passive voice can be used effectively if the subject or actor is either unknown or unimportant. For example, lab reports are usually written in passive voice. The passive may also be used to add sentence variety. Use your own judgment. In

general though, you should make a conscious effort to employ the active voice whenever possible.