

How to Use the Passive Voice

James Gordon Bailie

When the subject of a verb is the performer of the verb's action, the verb is active:

The hammer **strikes** the bell.

When the subject of a verb is the receiver of the verb's action, the verb is passive:

The bell **is struck** by the hammer.

The active verb is replaced with a past participle subject complement. The performer of the action is provided by a preposition.

Omitting the Performer

You can omit performer from a passive clause. This is useful when you do not know, do not care, or are concealing who or what the performer is:

The car **is stolen**.

Cars **are stolen** every day.

Shepherd's pie **is made** from minced lamb.

Cottage pie **is made** from minced beef.

These sentences can be converted into the active voice with anonymous subjects:

Someone **stole** the car.

Some party or parties **stole** the car.

People **steal** cars every day.

Thieves **steal** cars every day.

You **make** shepherd's pie from minced lamb.

One **makes** cottage pie from minced beef.

Dangling Modifiers

The passive voice can cause modifying phrases to dangle:

To post a letter, postage is required.

The preceding sentence says that for postage to post a letter, that postage is required. The thing being modified must be the subject of the sentence. The active voice is required:

To post a letter, you require postage.

To post a letter, one requires postage.

Consider another example:

Having waited in the rain for an hour, my trousers were drenched.

The preceding sentence says that my trousers waited in the rain for an hour. In this example, converting the clause to the active voice does not work:

Having waited in the rain for an hour, the rain drenched my trousers.

The preceding sentence says that the rain waited in the rain. The sentence requires a new clause whose subject is the person being modified:

Having waited in the rain for an hour, I had drenched trousers.

To use the passive voice, replace the participial phrase with a subordinate clause:

Because I waited in the rain for an hour, my trousers were drenched.

Choice

Prefer the active voice because it is vigorous and concise:

The cold air **woke** Amy.

Amy **was woken** by the cold air.

Prefer a definite subject over an anonymous subject:

We **determined** that...

It **was determined** that...

Because they describe a quality rather than an action, linking verbs paired with adjectives “feel” passive. Prefer active equivalents:

Mitchell **slept**.

Mitchell **was asleep**.

Use the passive voice when lucidity depends on placing the emphasis where it belongs. The subject of a sentence carries the emphasis:

What happened to these people?

He **was hit** by a car.

She **was hit** by a truck.

What hit these people?

A car **hit** him.

A truck **hit** her.