



PASSIVE VOICE

One comment instructors often write on student papers is “Lose the passive voice.” Easier said than done, when you don’t know what passive voice *is*. Let’s take a look:

First of all, *passive voice* is **not** the same as *past tense*. Many students automatically start looking for and removing the word “was,” which is incorrect. That would mean we could never say such things as “He was a doctor” or “The car was green.” In these instances, *was*—the past tense of *to be*—is simply a linking verb.

Nor can we simply remove *was* from a true passive constructions. That would mean we would take a sentence such as

The first successful telephone was invented in 1876.

and end up with

The first successful telephone invented in 1876.

This implies that the telephone invented something.

Let’s go back to what you learned in JOUR 301: write your sentences as Subject–Verb–Object (S–V–O).

The dog ate a bone.
S V O

This is basic **active voice**: *who* did *what* to *whom*. It’s clear and simple and in logical order.

When we switch to **passive voice**, we confuse the situation:

A bone was eaten by the dog.
O V S

Now we are out of order: *who or what* had *something done to it* by *whom*.

Often, **passive voice** causes us to leave important information out of our sentence:

The information was leaked to the press.
O V

Here we have no subject. Who did the leaking? Isn’t it important for your readers to know?

At times, however, passive voice is justified. Sometimes we just don't know (or care) who performed the action. It's simply more important that the action happened:

Her purse was stolen.

All we care about is that her purse is missing. The thief is just some anonymous jerk.

Smith was convicted of murder in the first degree.

In this instance, the subject is obvious. A jury did the convicting. It's more important to our audience that Smith, who has probably been in the news all week, will now be going to jail.

Finally, note the most well-known use of **passive voice**:

Mistakes were made.

This is intentional use of the **passive voice**. The speaker clearly does not *want* to identify the subject of the sentence, because that would mean someone was at fault. As a bit of grammarian humor, William Schneider of the *New York Times* coined this the "past exonerative tense" because it "exonerates" the speaker from any blame.

In sum, then, just remember:

Awkwardness is caused when passive voice is used.