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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, such as “is believed,” “was seen,” “will be considered,” or “are shown.” Consider the following examples:

Passive voice

The muster roll was read by the corporal.

The fort was erected.

Certain demands were made.

The militia company had been formed in 1675.

Active voice

The corporal read the muster roll.

General Lee's engineers erected the fort.

The commander made certain demands.

The county formed the militia company in 1675.

Why should I avoid the passive voice?

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.

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 the operating costs, members of the humane society run the facility and provide additional support through fund raising.

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 who?”:

The lieutenant admits some mistakes were made.

Because of increased demands, taxes 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. 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.