

## THE UNIVERSITY WRITING CENTER 3211 HHRA BUILDING

## PASSIVE AND ACTIVE VOICE

Related Handouts: See TERMS TO KNOW: Vital Sentence Elements (subject and verb), and Prepositional and Verbal Phrases (past participles); and WEAK VS. STRONG VERBS

## THE PRINCIPLE

When the subject of a sentence does something (takes some action), we say that the verb is in the active voice.

Ex: Emeril **burned** the toast. ("Emeril" is the subject; "burned" is the active verb.)

When the grammatical subject of the sentence has something done to it (when the subject remains passive), we say that the verb is in the passive voice.

The toast was burned by Emeril. ("The toast" is the subject; "was burned" is the Ex: passive verb.)

Here's another way to recognize passive verbs:

When a form of the verb "to be" (is, am , are, was, were, is being, has been, etc) is used in conjunction with a past participle, the verb is said to be passive. Note the underlined passive verbs in that sentence!

While using the passive voice is not incorrect (in fact, it might be necessary or preferred in some cases), the active voice usually makes sentences more clear, concise, and lively.

## **EXAMPLES**

CLUMSY:

After a long waiting period had been endured by the contestants, the winner was (passive verbs underlined)

announced by the judge.

BETTER:

After the contestants had waited for a long time, the judge announced the

winner.

(active verbs italicized)

WORDY:

Although Emeril is generally considered to be one of the best chefs in the

business, prizes are not always awarded to his pies.

(passive verbs underlined)

CONCISE:

Although Emeril *may be* one of the best chefs in the business, his pies *do not always win* prizes. (active verbs italicized)

To change a verb from passive to active, figure out who or what is DOING something in the sentence, and make that word the grammatical subject of the sentence.

Ex: Every pie in the Iowa State Fair pie contest is given a thorough taste test.

Ask yourself, who tastes those pies??? Make them the subject of the sentence!

Several carefully chosen judges *give* every pie in the Iowa State Fair pie contest a thorough taste test.

OR Several carefully chosen judges taste every pie in the Iowa State Fair pie contest.

As the previous example demonstrates, one potential problem with passive verbs is that they can leave the meaning of a sentence quite vague. (In the passive version of the sentence, we don't know who is giving those pies the taste test.) Now if you want your meaning to remain a bit vague, the passive voice might be just the solution:

Ex: Emeril's cherry pie was considered a bit too dry.

(If you don't want to Emeril to know who considered his pie too dry, stick with the passive!)

But usually, it's best to save passive verbs for times when the person doing the action <u>is</u> <u>truly unknown</u> (did you catch that passive?) or when the active verb would make the sentence even more awkward than the passive verb does:

Ex: The report that Emeril was suing the judges was probably exaggerated. (passive)

Someone probably exaggerated the report that Emeril was suing the judges.

(Italicized verb is active but not necessarily better; we still don't know who exaggerated.)

The moral of the story is this:

- 1) Learn to recognize the difference between active and passive verbs.
- 2) Don't use the passive form unless you have a good reason to do so.