Passive Voice: What It Is and How to Reduce Usage

What is passive voice?

Passive voice involves the construction of verbs in a sentence. Passive voice isn’t necessarily grammatically incorrect, and it is often used in writing for the sciences. Excessive usage, however, can contribute to unclear sentence meaning or convoluted sentence structure. It is better to utilize the counterpart of passive voice—active voice—whenever possible. Revising a sentence from passive voice to active voice will always involve the modification of a verb.

The first step in correcting passive voice usage is recognizing when it is being utilized. Examples:

Sentence using passive voice:

The student has been exhausted by her exams. This sentence is passive because the subject (the student) is being acted upon. In active voice, the agent responsible for the action of the verb will perform that given action.

Sentence using active voice:

The exams exhausted the student. This sentence is active because the exams are responsible for exhausting the student, not vice versa.

Sentence using passive voice:

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone was written by J.K Rowling.

Sentence using active voice:

J.K. Rowling wrote Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone. The latter sentence is active because J.K Rowling is responsible for writing the book (the book isn’t responsible for writing her!)

Passive Voice vs. Past Tense

Many people confuse passive voice usage with writing in the past tense. However, a sentence written in past tense can still be “active.”
Examples:

Sentence using passive voice:

It *was suggested* by the results that our hypothesis was correct.

Sentence using active voice:

Our results *suggested* a correct hypothesis.

Tips for Recognizing Passive Voice Usage:

If words like *was, were, has been, is being, will be, or have been* are coupled with a word that ends in “-ed” or “-ing” there is a good chance that you are using the passive voice (ex. was discovered, is being written, will be noticed, had been reading)

Passive voice sentences often include the phrases “by” or “by the.” Ex. The car *was being driven by the* woman (as opposed to the active voice sentence “The woman drove the car.”)

Work Cited & Additional Resource: