The Passive Voice

A **passive voice** construction occurs when you make the **object** of an action into the **subject** of a sentence. Here’s an example: *The road was crossed by the chicken.*

The chicken is doing the action in this sentence -- crossing the road. But the word “chicken” is not in the spot where you would expect the subject to be. Instead, the road is the grammatical subject in that sentence. The more familiar phrasing – *The chicken crossed the road.* – places the actor in the subject position. The chicken (the actor/doer) crosses the road (the object). Most of the time, you should use active verbs to represent all forms of “doing,” whether it be crossing roads, proposing ideas, or making arguments.

**How do you identify passive voice?**

Look for a form of “to be” (*is, are, am, was, were, has been, have been, had been, will be, will have been, being*) followed by a **past participle**. (The past participle is a form of the verb that typically, but not always, ends in “-ed.” Some exceptions to the “-ed” rule are words like “paid” (not “payed”) and “driven.” (not “drived”). So a **form of “to be” + past participle = passive voice.**

The passive voice is not a grammatical error. It’s a style choice that affects clarity. Using the passive voice can prevent a reader from understanding your meaning. One way it can obscure meaning is by not identifying the actor at all. For example: *It was decided that all citizens must carry identification cards at all times.* Does that sentence identify who made the decision? No.

Compare to this active-voice sentence: *The state legislature decided to require that citizens must carry identification cards at all times.*

**When might the passive voice be better?**

In some cases, the passive voice might be preferable:

1. When the actor is not important: *Since there was no corroborating witness, the documents were properly excluded.*
2. When the actor is unknown: *My car was stolen last night.*
3. When you wish to hide the actor’s identity: *The votes were tallied before you arrived.*
4. When you need to put the emphasis (“the punch word”) at the end of the sentence: *The picture was painted by Picasso.*
5. When the focus of the passage is on the thing being acted upon: *The sentence needs to be rewritten.*
6. When the passive voice simply “sounds better”: *The tires need to be rotated.*

These six situations account for only about 15%-20% of the times the passive voice appears. You should have a strong preference for the active voice and choose passive voice only for one of these particular reasons.