Avoiding Passive Voice

Defining Voice

- In grammar, voice denotes the relationship of the subject to the verb of the sentence.
- In active voice, the subject is active. It performs the action of the verb.
  
  Jesus healed the leper.

- Only action verbs have voice.

- In passive voice, the subject is passive in relation to the verb. The subject is acted upon.

- Passive voice verbs consist of the use of a being verb along with the past participle of an action verb.

  The leper was touched by Jesus.

- In the preceding sentence the leper is passive in relation to the verb. Also, note the being verb was is used with the –ed verb.

- In many sentences in the passive voice, the noun that actually performs the action is the object of a preposition following the verb:

  Seven personal fouls were called by one referee against the Saints.

  Correct: One referee called seven personal fouls against the Saints.

- Other passive voice sentences, however, do not identify who is doing the action.

  Incorrect: Thirty thousand Gibeonites were killed after they could not pronounce the word Shibboleth.
  Corrected: Jephthah’s troops killed thirty-thousand Gibeonites after they could not pronounce the word Shibboleth.
Advantages of the active voice:
- More concise
- More specific
- More energetic/forceful

Uses of the passive voice
- When the actual subject is unknown
- When the writer wants to emphasize the recipient of the action rather than the doer of the action.

Remember, writing a sentence in the passive voice is not a grammatical mistake. It is a matter of style, and professors prefer that students write in the active voice whenever possible.

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