

Verbs: Passive Voice

Definition:

The **passive voice** is a special way to form sentences in which the subject and the object of a sentence switch places with one another.

Example: Americans fought the Civil War from 1861-1865. (*active voice*)
The Civil War was fought (by Americans) from 1861-1865. (*passive voice*)

Notice how in this example, the Civil War, which was the object of the original sentence, becomes the subject when the sentence is changed to passive voice.

When to use the passive:

The passive is commonly used in the following cases:

1. **When the writer wishes to place emphasis on something or someone other than the agent (agent = whoever or whatever is performing the action).**

Example: The Great Wall of China was built for protection from invaders.

In this sentence, The Great Wall of China is the focus of the sentence, not the people who built it.

2. **When the writer wishes to avoid saying who performed an action.**

Example: Millions of dollars' worth of bonuses were given to AIG executives.

Here, the author may wish to avoid mentioning where the money came from.

3. **When writing about historical events or scientific facts.**

Example #1: An operation was performed to repair the injured knee.

Example #2: The Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776.

When NOT to use the passive:

Do not use the passive when using an active form is clearer and more concise. In general, avoid using the passive unless there is a good reason to do so.

Example: A wonderful movie was watched by my friends. (wordy)

Corrected Example: My friends watched a wonderful movie. (concise)

Forming the Passive:

The passive is formed with forms of the word *be* + the past participle. The form of the verb *be* will change according to the verb tense being used (present, past, future, etc.).

Example #1: Dinner *is served*. (present)

Example #2: *Are you being helped?* (present)

Example #3: His work *was done*. (past)

Example #4: The job *will be done* by the time you get home tomorrow. (future)