



For robust writing, get active!

Active voice, as you might know, is a grammatical construction in which the subject of the sentence is performing the action of the verb. For example: *The boy embraced the dog*. In contrast, in a passive construction, the subject of the sentence is acted upon: *The dog was embraced by the boy*. Research suggests that passive constructions are more difficult for readers to comprehend, in part because they tend to obscure the identity of the actor. You'll notice that politicians use passive voice to avoid blame: "Yes, mistakes were made." Hmm... by you, Mr. President?

Read the following sentences:

Passive: "Our conversation was interrupted by Alex."

Active: "Alex interrupted our conversation."

You probably found the second sentence more direct and robust.

Passive voice can be useful, however, when explaining a process. For example, which of the following do you prefer?

Passive: "Freight can be transported across the border by truck, train, or plane."

Active: "Trucks, trains, and planes can transport freight across the border."

In this example, the passive voice construction works somewhat better than the active construction because the most important noun being discussed here is the freight.

Passive voice can also be useful when you want to vary your phrasing. For instance, maybe you've just said, "Journalists report the election results..." You want to continue, but you don't want to repeat "Journalists" or "election results," so you say, "Journalists report the election results, which are conveyed by news sites..."

Although passive voice can be useful, make sure you *prefer* active voice whenever possible, as it typically gives writing greater simplicity and immediacy. In short, don't get carried away with passive voice.