

In the many years that I've been a member of fiction writers' groups, I've noticed that the term PASSIVE VOICE comes up regularly in reviews, and more often than not the reviewer makes erroneous statements. For this reason, I've written a small tutorial on passive voice. I've drawn material from *The Chicago Manual of Style* and Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, as well as comments from my wife, a long-time teacher of creative writing and English as a Second Language.

## Why Worry about Passive Voice?

The reason is that its complement, ACTIVE VOICE, is, well, more active than passive voice. Active voice commands a sense of urgency and generally makes writing more powerful. Therefore, active voice should be favored over passive in most cases.

The key here is MOST cases. Not all. Sometimes passive voice is preferable to active, and sometimes it is almost mandatory. A skilled writer will understand which voice is preferred for any situation, and make a deliberate, informed choice. A careless writer will use the two voices randomly, and thereby produce weak writing.

## What is Passive Voice?

The rule for distinguishing between active and passive voice is simple: voice is defined by whether the SUBJECT of the sentence ACTS ON or IS ACTED UPON by the direct object. In active voice, the subject is the agent of the action, and the direct object is the recipient. In passive voice, the direct object is the agent of the action, and the subject is the recipient. So:

Jack hit the ball. (Active because Jack is the subject and he did the hitting, while ball, the direct object, received the action.)

Jack was hit by the ball. (Passive because Jack is the subject but he received the action of hitting. The ball did the hitting.)

Jack was hitting the ball. (Active voice because the subject, Jack, is doing the hitting)

Note that occasionally the direct object will be implied rather than stated:

Jill hit the ball. Jack was hit.

The second sentence is passive, with the direct object being implied (the unstated ball).

An implication of this rule is that if a sentence does not have a direct object (stated or implied), it cannot be passive. Only TRANSITIVE verbs have a voice.

## Constructions Commonly Mistaken for Passive Voice

Beginning writers commonly believe that WAS or WERE automatically imply passive voice. This is not the case at all. Numerous non-passive constructions involving these words exist. Two of the most common are:

1) WAS acts as a linking verb, linking the subject to a state, generally an adjective or a gerund:

Jack was apprehensive about jumping over the stream. (WAS links Jack to the state of being apprehensive)

Jack was dumbfounded every time he struck out. (WAS links Jack to the state of being dumbfounded.)

Jack was devastated when Judy sneered at him. (WAS links Jack to the state of being devastated.)

2) WAS produces the CONTINUOUS PAST tense as opposed to the SIMPLE PAST tense. Simple past describes an action that has completed. Continuous past is used to describe an action that is ongoing:

Jack jumped over the candle and tripped. (Simple past: he jumped and then he tripped)

Jack was jumping over the candle when he tripped. (Continuous past because he was in the process of jumping when he tripped.)

Note that sometimes these two interpretations are interchangeable, because an ongoing action can be interpreted as a state:

Jack was running as fast as he could. (He was engaged in the continuous action of running. Alternatively, he was in the state of running.)

## Ambiguities

Passive voice is not always clearly defined. Consider:

Three shots were fired. John was hit.

The subject of the first sentence is SHOTS. An unnamed agent did the firing. What was fired? Shots, the subject. So 'shots' is the recipient. This is clearly passive voice. Nothing ambiguous here.

Now look at the second sentence. John is the subject. One interpretation is that the unnamed agent 'shot' or 'bullet' hit John, the recipient. Passive voice.

An equally reasonable interpretation is that 'hit' is not acting as a verb. Rather, it is a predicate adjective describing the state of John. Under this interpretation, the sentence is not in passive voice. The author should carefully ponder such constructions. Some editors will flag them, and others will not.

## When is Passive Voice Preferable to Active?

1) Sometimes the agent of the action must remain undefined. Strunk and White give the following example:

The dramatists of the Restoration are little esteemed today.

The writer of this sentence does not wish to explicitly identify who has the lack of esteem.

The battle ended quickly. Only three shots were fired.

The writer of the second sentence does not wish to identify the shooter(s).

2) Sometimes the writer prefers to risk a passive interpretation of placement rather than burden the reader with seeing the placement happen:

The control panel was conveniently positioned at chest height.

If there is an outside controlling force who POSITIONED (transitive verb) the control panel in this spot, then this is passive voice.

But in the more usual interpretation, this sentence is simply describing where the control panel is located. In this case, POSITIONED is a participle acting as a predicate adjective. This is probably preferable to an active construction like: The engineers had conveniently positioned the control panel at chest height. Probably. The writer must choose.

3) Passive voice can stress helplessness or defeat when the subject is in a passive state. As a bonus, one can often argue in such cases that it's not even passive voice. It's an ambiguous predicate adjective construction. For example:

I bet my last dollar on Old Betsy, and she lost. I was devastated.

Of course, you could put it in active voice by saying "The loss devastated me."

But many people would say that the (possibly) passive voice better conveys a sense of devastation. One could also reasonably argue that WAS is linking I to the state of being devastated.

## A Personal Gripe

I'll end with a comment on an erroneous criticism that I see in reviews all the time. It is a problem because beginning writers may become confused and misled.

The situation occurs when the writer appropriately uses the continuous past tense to indicate an ongoing action, and the uninformed reviewer calls it passive voice and changes it to simple past, resulting in incorrect grammar. Here's a typical example:

Judy was wearing a red dress the night that she met Bob.

This is active voice because the subject, Judy, is doing the wearing. The direct object, DRESS, is the recipient of the wearing.

This sentence is (correctly) in continuous past tense because she was in the act of wearing the dress when she met Bob. She was continuously wearing it, and during this time period of wearing it, she met Bob.

Many reviewers would see WAS, erroneously call this passive voice, and change it to:

Judy wore a red dress the night that she met Bob.

Although most readers would get the meaning here, it is nevertheless grammatically ambiguous. Perhaps she wore the red dress for a while, and then changed into a blue dress just before meeting Bob. Because simple past implies completion of the event, this sentence does not make it clear that she still had it on when they met.

Okay, I admit that this may be a poor example because the problem here is more grammatical than practical. Even though the simple past is technically incorrect here, most readers would understand that the writer meant that she was still wearing the red dress when she met Bob. One could even argue that changing it to simple past eliminates WAS as unnecessary clutter. Tight, uncluttered constructions are always good, so in this case I can see a possible justification for simple past, even though it is technically incorrect. Just please, please, please, do not tell the writer that you've just fixed a passive voice. You have not. You've simply made a trade off, introducing a bit of grammatical ambiguity in exchange for eliminating one word. I generally choose to be precise and grammatically correct, while others may choose to eliminate one word. This is the writer's prerogative.

Sometimes the difference is more apparent, though. Consider these two sentences:

- 1) Judy put on her best red dress when Bob unexpectedly showed up.
- 2) Judy was putting on her best red dress when Bob unexpectedly showed up.

The simple and continuous past tenses here have entirely different meanings. The first implies that she put it on for Bob, while the second implies that she was already putting it on for another purpose.

Also consider:

- 1) She brushed her teeth when Bob knocked on the door. (She did it for him.)
- 2) She was brushing her teeth when Bob knocked on the door. (She got caught in the act.)
  
- 1) She wore lacy black underwear when Bob came to town. (She knows what he likes.)
- 2) She was wearing lacy black underwear when Bob came to town. (A happy coincidence)

The rule here is that you must decide the time relationship between the events and choose the simple or continuous past tense appropriately. If you, as a writer, deliberately choose to avoid WAS by using the simple past when the continuous past is more correct, that's your right, though you must carefully consider any possible ambiguity. If, on the other hand, you choose to use the continuous past (WAS verb) because that shows the correct time relationship, that's also your right.

### Final Points to Remember:

- 1) Passive voice is not always undesirable. It is often appropriate. Just don't use it by accident. Use it by informed choice.
  
- 2) Only transitive verbs (those in which an AGENT acts on a RECIPIENT) have voice. In active voice, the subject is the agent. In passive voice, the subject is the recipient.
  
- 3) Do not think that WAS/WERE automatically implies passive voice. These words are often used to link the subject to a state, or for continuous past.
  
- 4) If you are inclined to avoid WAS, always beware of using the simple past tense instead of the continuous past. Before doing it, make sure that your meaning is clear. Sometimes the price of eliminating that one word is just too high.