Wells College Writing Center *Grammar Hammer*

Active vs. Passive Voice

While tense is all about time, voice describes whether the grammatical subject of a clause performs or receives the action of the verb.

Passive voice verbs are used in writing much more often than in speech, and they are used in some types of writing much more often than in others. Passive voice is used more in journalism than in fiction, but most journalists and fiction writers use far more active than passive sentences. However, the passive voice is very common in all types of scientific and technical writing. Scientific articles often contain more passive than active sentences. Nevertheless, you should not use passive voice verbs unless you have a good reason.

Here’s the formula for the active voice: **[subject] + [verb (performed by the subject)] + [optional object].**  
**Ex.** Chester kicked the ball.

With passive voice, the grammatical subject of the clause receives the action of the verb. So, the ball from the above sentence, which is receiving the action, becomes the subject.

The formula: **[subject] + [some form of the verb to be] + [past participle of a transitive verb] + [optional prepositional phrase]   
Ex.** The ball was kicked by Chester.

**Note:** The object of the active verb is the subject of the passive verb (“English” in the example sentences below). Therefore, verbs which cannot be followed by objects (intransitive verbs) cannot be used in passive voice. So, intransitive verbs such as fall and thrive cannot have direct objects and therefore cannot be used in passive sentences.

**Ex.** I fell down.

This sentence cannot become passive because it contains no object.

Some more common intransitive verbs: appear, arrive, come, cry, die, go, happen, occur, rain, sleep, stay, walk.

**Reasons for using passive voice:**

1. Passive voice is often used when the agent (the doer of an action; the subject of an active verb) is obvious, unknown, or unnecessary:

Oranges are grown in California.

Toyotas are made in Japan.

Her purse was stolen.

2. Passive voice is often used when the agent is known, but the speaker/writer doesn’t want to mention it:

She was given bad advice.

A mistake has been made.

3. Passive voice is often used when the agent is very general such as people or somebody.

English is spoken here.

The door should be locked.

4. Passive voice is often used when the speaker/writer wants to emphasize a result:

Several thousand people were killed by the earthquake.

5. Passive voice is often used when the speaker/writer wants to keep the same subject for two or more verbs but this would not be possible if both verbs were the same voice (active or passive).

For example, in a conversation about George, a speaker would probably use sentence **a** below rather than sentence **b** (both sentences are correct).

a. George had several interviews before he was hired by a software company.

b. George had several interviews before a software company hired him.