

Eliminating Passive Voice

DEFINITION: Active voice sentences contain subjects that perform the action of the verb. The subjects are “doers,” and the active voice guarantees that the reader will understand which subject is performing the action, whereas passive voice can make this relationship ambiguous.

EXAMPLE: The man *pulled* the sheets over the corners of the bed.
The man, the main subject of the sentence, is the one *pulling* the sheet.

A passive voice sentence contains a subject that does not perform an action. Instead, the action of the verb happens to the subject. Sometimes, science and social sciences prefer the passive voice because it provides a more objective perspective.

EXAMPLE: The sheets *were pulled* over the corners of the bed by the man.

In this sentence, the main subject is sheets, but the man is the one *doing* the action of pulling. Thus, the main subject is being acted on, rather than acting.

EXERCISE: IDENTIFY THE PASSIVE VOICE IN THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES. CHANGE THE PASSIVE VOICE INTO ACTIVE.

1. Administrators have been attempting to boost registration for the program, but the entrance exam was failed by over half of the applicants, which makes it difficult for administrators to admit more students.
2. At 8:30 a.m., the media announced that action on the bill is being considered by the committee.
3. For almost 38 years, England was ruled by King Henry VIII.

HAVING TROUBLE? Let's take a closer look at how to eliminate passive voice by cutting down on “to be” verbs.

Eliminating Auxiliary Verbs

DEFINITION: Auxiliary verbs accompany main verbs and add grammatical meaning to a sentence. However, auxiliary verbs are overused and often unnecessary. The most common auxiliary verbs are “to be” (am, are, was, were, being), “to do” (does, did), and “to have” (has, had, having).

IF AN ACTIVE VERB CAN EFFECTIVELY CONVEY YOUR MEANING, REPLACE THE AUXILIARY VERB WITH A MORE SPECIFIC ACTIVE VERB.

PASSIVE VERB EXAMPLE: We were traveling from city to city in Europe and were young and in love.

REVISION: Young and in love, we traveled from city to city in Europe.

EXERCISES: REPLACE THE FOLLOWING AUXILIARY VERBS WITH ACTIVE VERBS. YOU MIGHT NEED TO RESTRUCTURE THE SENTENCE.

1. According to the tabloid, the movie star was effective at convincing her costars that she did not have an eating disorder.
2. Unfortunately, I think that Professor Smith's assessment correctly describes America's plight: Elementary students' low test scores in reading reflect the fact that books have been replaced by the internet in American culture.
3. When we were snorkeling, we looked at the most unusual kinds of fish and were surprised and excited.
4. Having just woken up, I was not able to understand why the bedroom window was open.
5. The point of the lecture was to convince graduate students that delaying their entry into the workforce was not a detrimental financial decision.

Eliminating Nominalizations

DEFINITION: A nominalization is a verb, adjective, or adverb used as the head noun in a noun phrase. Nominalizations make syntax overly complex and confusing.

EXAMPLE: The contemporary dance technique is a creation of Hans Fields.

REVISION: Hans Fields created the contemporary dance technique.

EXAMPLE: Woolf's analysis is an investigation into the roles of women historically.

REVISION: Woolf investigates women's historical roles.

EXERCISES: CORRECT THE NOMINALIZATIONS IN THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES. YOU MAY NEED TO RESTRUCTURE THE SENTENCES. DON'T BE AFRAID TO ADD A SUBJECT.

1. The ridicule on Facebook was a retaliation for her harmful Twitter comments.
2. Though she noticed many issues with the paper, clarity was the main emphasis of the editor.
3. There was opposition to Darwin's theory of natural selection.

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Comment [1]: "Creation" is the nominalization here. Notice that the word needs an auxiliary verb ("is") and a preposition ("of") in order to make sense. The verb construction is wordy and indirect.

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Comment [2]: "Created" is a direct and descriptive verb.

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Comment [3]: Both "analysis" and "investigation" are nominalizations. The auxiliary verb "is" bridges the two together. The result is a clunky and indirect sentence.

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Comment [4]: "Investigates" is a direct and descriptive verb.

4. She makes a good point: There is a need for young children to be constantly supervised by adults.
5. For years, the pledge has been a reinforcement of the country's constitution.

HAVING TROUBLE? Let's talk about subjects and verbs. Reviewing these parts of speech will make it easier to correct passive voice.

Understanding Subjects and Verbs

DEFINITION: Sentences are made up of subjects and verbs. Nearly every sentence must have both a subject and a verb to be complete.

THE SUBJECT OF THE SENTENCE IS THE PERSON, PLACE, THING, OR IDEA THAT IS DOING OR BEING SOMETHING.

THE SUBJECTS IN THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES ARE UNDERLINED:

My mother won the lottery.

After midnight, he falls asleep.

My favorite animal is the polar bear.

UNDERLINE THE SUBJECTS IN THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES:

Surprisingly, the Martians appeared friendly and cooperative.

The banker wore a fashionable vest.

Worried about finding employment, Sarah wondered if she should admit that she had once committed a felony.

Eventually, I think the bald eagle will be restored to its original majesty.

Among his most important buildings were the Guaranty Building and the Carson Pirie Scott store.

For some, backpacking is the ultimate vacation.

I was so hurt by her coldness and skepticism, that the tears rose to my eyes.

The wilderness has a way of cleansing the spirit.

Swimming every morning is my preferred exercise.

After swimming each morning, I feel great when I get to work.

THE VERB DESCRIBES THE ACTION OR STATE OF BEING TAKEN BY THE SUBJECT.

THE VERBS THAT MODIFY THE SUBJECTS ARE BOLDED:

My mother **won** the lottery.
After midnight, he **falls** asleep.
My favorite animal **is** the polar bear.

CIRCLE THE VERBS IN THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES:

Who goes there?

Baseball is good for the soul.

She thinks about her ex-boyfriend too much.

Who is Barbara's mother?

Amanda must have heard us talking because she began walking toward us.

Some sports fans argue that baseball is good for the soul.

However, he never specified when we would meet.

In my dream last night, I travelled to Paris, France.

He often watched television at night.

Why should students pay the consequences for legislators' irresponsible decisions?

Irritated, the professor asked her students to put away their cell phones.

"Please hurry," Sarah added.

PRACTICE: Now that you understand that subjects should be supported by active verbs, revise the following sentences. You may need to clarify subjects or restructure the sentences.

1. After seven phone calls to the contracting company, the debris was finally removed from the construction site.
2. Controlled burning was used by the Nevada landowners to prevent the wildfire from spreading to their homes, but ultimately, their efforts were not successful and the most devastating fire damage since 1987 occurred.
3. All in all, the conference was successful because new business connections were made and old friends were reconnected.
4. It was determined by the committee that the report was inconclusive.
5. The proposed initiative will be bitterly opposed by voters' rights groups.

6. Thus, the people's traditional religion was able to survive the onslaught of new ideas until the old gods were finally displaced by Christianity.
7. We were invited by our neighbors to attend Frances's first birthday party.
8. Ecosystem destabilization is often the consequence of invasion.
9. A demonstration of wrapping techniques was performed by the store employee.
10. A study was conducted by the psychologists to determine the social pressures that fathers face.