The Passive Voice, the easy way!

BY: Mubarak Abdessalami

It is true that the passive voice is most talked about by our students. I think we can go beyond the formal grammar rules and deal with it in the funniest way. That's -between us- a sort of word games. Let's enjoy talking about the passive voice in the absence of Mr R.G.R (Rigid Grammar Rule). We will be back biters for a while, yet I hope in the benefit of both The Passive Voice and our students.

Let's make one of the old so missed rules our starting point. The rule says: the object of the active sentence is always the subject of the passive one. But before all let's see what does the active sentence look like before the operation then go to discuss the process the doctor follows during the operation and examine the patient after the operation. It is not an easy work to do, I admit it.

<<The passive voice of any transitive verb is made by combining its past participle with the appropriate tense of the verb "to be">>, the teacher said. He means that the verb to be is always the doctor who can operate on the sentence successfully in a "passive voice" surgery. Take this so called the patient active sentence, for instance,

Someone plays the piano every night

This sentence is composed of a subject: (someone), a verb: (plays), and an object. And the latter is the organ that gears the whole operation. It is the most important part of the utterance to make the operation feasible.

What we have to do first is to pull the object down to begin our new sentence with.

The piano............

After that we prepare the verb to be for the operation. The verb is going to be the patient. We make a quick diagnostic to look for two essential things about it; that's to say the verb itself: play and its tense: the simple present. This should not take time; it is a matter of a fraction of a second. What for?! The tense should be taken to the verb plays and given to "to be". Thus the verb "to be " in the simple present is am, is, or are. It is our new subject which decides on the best choice. In this case, "The piano" must logically choose is because it is the most suitable for it. No doubt our sentence in the passive will progress this way,

The piano is..........

Now the verb play goes directly to take the past participle form i.e.: played because it is a regular verb. Thus we reach,

The piano is played........

Is it necessary to add anything? Yes, it is. We shouldn't forget about the adverb of time "every night" to finally have,

The piano is played every night.

However (by someone) is not correct at all because the agent or (the doer) is not known and is adding no information to the sentence. On the contrary, if the agent is "Bach" for instance we have to mention him. Compare,
ACTIVE VOICE: Someone plays the piano every night.
PASSIVE VOICE: The piano is played every night. (Or)
Every night, the piano is played.

And

ACTIVE VOICE: Bachir plays the piano every night.
PASSIVE VOICE: The piano is played by Bachir every night. (Or)
Every night, the piano is played (by Bachir).

The agent however is not to be mentioned because its effect on the information that the Passive sentence transmits is almost null.

Here is another example, but this time in a different tense: *The present progressive tense.*

ACTIVE VOICE: The student is reading the page.
PASSIVE VOICE: The page is being read (by the student)

If you have learnt how to transform the sentence from the active to the passive you'll be able to explain the changes that have occurred on this sentence.

The object is the page the verb "read" is sustained by an auxiliary (is) which should not be changed unless the subject is in plural.

With the present perfect things look quite easier because even you don't learn the irregular verbs this form gives you - freeware - past participles of the verbs you need to transform. Take this sentence for example. What remains to concentrate upon is the insertion of "been" in the right place. Study these examples:

1. ACTIVE VOICE: The dog has broken the window pane.
PASSIVE VOICE: The window pane has been broken (by the dog).

2. ACTIVE VOICE: The housewife swept the floor.
PASSIVE VOICE: The floor has been swept (by the housewife).

Besides this, when the active sentence is in the future; or any of the modals is used, the passive sentence seems quite easier to do. The structure is as follows:

[Subject + modal + be + past participle]

The following tables illustrate how the transformation is done:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Halima</th>
<th>• will</th>
<th>• mail the letter tomorrow.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• would</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• can</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• could</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• may</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• might</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• shall</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• should</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ought to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• must</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• has to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The letter will be mailed tomorrow. [N.B: "will" can be replaced by all the other "modals"]
If we want to analyze the last sentence we can simply say:

1. The object "the letter" could be "the letters" and nothing changes.
2. The modal comes down after the new subject: The letter will....... 
3. The verb "mail" tense is "The infinitive" so "to be" is wearing it to eventually become "be": The letter will be...... 
4. The verb "mail" now is converted into the past participle i.e.: mailed: The letter will be mailed tomorrow.

The agent Halima -let's repeat it- is not needed.

Nevertheless there are some cases that have to be dealt with carefully. When the subject of the active sentence is "No one", "nobody" or "none", the sentence in the passive form is negative:

**Nobody has watered the garden.**

In sentences as such, the subject should be discerned and taken into account for fear we should drop the negative meaning it encloses. If it happens that we take it for a normal subject such as "everybody" or "someone", we risk missing the inclusion of the negative character of the sentence.

**The garden has not been watered.**

As you can see, it is the subject "nobody" which brings about the negation represented by the word "not" in the sentence.

Moreover, when you have a sentence with two objects, we normally choose the personal one or at least the direct object. After it depends on the idea you want to stress. In the following sentence there are two objects. It is the underlined one which is suitable to choose as subject for your passive sentence/

**ACTIVE VOICE:** My friend showed her an old manuscript.
**PASSIVE VOICE:** She was shown an old manuscript.

You can probably say: “**An old manuscript was shown to her**”. But as you see it's quite "heavy" for the ear to bear. The first one then is the most acceptable. Nevertheless, if the speaker wants to highlight the "old manuscript" because it is the most important element in the informative sentence, in this case the sentence, though not really authentic, it can carry the meaning intended.
I have to draw your attention to "phrasal verbs" as well. These also can be misleading because of their *prepositions*:

**ACTIVE VOICE**: The red car ran *over* the dog.
**PASSIVE VOICE**: The dog *was run* *over* (by the red car).

Now, here are some sentences for you in order to practise this "game" of playing on word order and verb tenses ....The objects are CAPITALIZED to make them easily detectible:

1. People admired YOUR LAST BOOK. ___________________________________
2. Someone is knocking at THE DOOR. ___________________________________
3. She has stolen A CAR. ___________________________________
4. They bought US sandwiches. ___________________________________
5. She hands out THE EXAMPAPERS. ___________________________________
6. They will show YOU my house. ___________________________________
7. Someone could repair THE LORRY. ___________________________________
8. He is sweeping THE FLOOR. ___________________________________
9. People must respect THE LAW. ___________________________________
10. People all over the world speak ENGLISH. ____________________________
11. They have made HIM a headmaster. ___________________________________
12. The gang broke into THE BANK. ___________________________________
13. Someone sent ME a beautiful card. ___________________________________
14. You should do ALL THE EXERCISES. ________________________________
15. She is looking after MY CHILDREN. ________________________________
16. They were telling YOUR SON never to ride that bike. ____________________
17. He has been typing THE LETTER. ___________________________________

**KEY** (SEE BELOW)

All in all, I think this list is unlimited. I hope you'll find interesting ideas throughout this quick presentation of the...

**PASSIVE Vs ACTIVE VOICES**

First of all, I'd like to draw your attention to a very important point about the **passive Voice**. Most students of English take it for granted that the passive voice is just another way of expressing a sentence in the active voice; which is extremely dangerous, and harmful for the learning of natural language. It is true that the most important part of our utterances in spoken and written language are in the passive voice yet this doesn't mean that they all stem from an active source: Not all the sentences in the active form could be expressed in the passive form even in school tests. A sentence in the active voice is used in specific circumstances and the passive one is also needed in other almost completely different situations, i.e. when the active voice cannot express the idea quite clearly or when it is unnecessary to mention the agent because it is either unidentified, unknown or common like (someone, people, everybody etc..) or perhaps without the mentioning of the agent, our sentence might have a greater effect on our interlocutor. I'll give you a simple example:

*Compare these three pairs of sentences:*

a. You must not throw rubbish in the river.*"
b. Rubbish must not be thrown in the river (by you/everybody).

1. You should correct these mistakes.
   2. These mistakes should be corrected. (by you)

A. You must pay the bill first, (Sir/Madam).
B. The bill must be paid first. (by everybody).

The examples (a & b) are the same: they express the same idea but the sentence (b) is more expressive because the speaker doesn't mean you but all people. If I have to choose between the two, I'll take the sentence (b) though the first also says the same thing. It is a matter of style and priority. I mean that the sentence in the passive here expresses the idea better than the same sentence expressed in the active voice.

The examples (1 & 2) are the same, too. Yet in this case the active one (1) is far more expressive than the sentence in the passive (2). Here the speaker does not generalize; YOU not all the students for instance who should correct those mistakes. Here, sentence (1) is the most accurate (correct), although the sentence (2) says the same thing but in a very clumsy aberrant way.

As for the third couple of sentences (A & B), the "You" stands generally for everybody because it introduces a rule or a law which everybody must respect. Yet the first is less clear in this sense than the second. «You must pay ..." means "You: (Sir or Madam)" personally not everybody. But the second means that "The bill must be paid" before anything else can be done. The procedure is to pay the bill first and then go to the next step. You are not the only one concerned with this rule or law. It is an obligation for everybody.

All in all, the passive voice use is confined with the context. It is the context of a given situation which systematically dictates the sort of utterance to be used. It's the situation which decides whether your sentence would be expressive of what you wanted to say in the way you said it.

The problem with the pronoun "I"

Here is something I want you to concentrate on:

- I bought a new shirt last week.
- I read a book yesterday.

These two sentences for example can never be set in the passive voice even though they have got objects: a new shirt and a book respectively. Look at them this way:

- A new shirt was bought (by me) last week.
- A book was read (by me) yesterday.

I presume that sentences as such are not English at all. They look strange and awkward because transforming them into the passive is only a grotesque curiosity. They end up in nothing. A sentence like "I bought a new shirt last week" or "I read a book yesterday" can only be expressed this way, I mean in the ACTIVE VOICE.
Other examples

1. I can speak English. English can be spoken (by me)*
2. Ahmed likes bananas. Bananas are liked (by Ahmed).*
3. Ali respects his parents. Ali's parents are respected (by him).*

All of these are examples of the category of sentences that are natural and expressive only when they are used in their ACTIVE form. Once they are put into the PASSIVE, it is simply a mechanical manoeuvre which only spoils the initial meaning of the sentence. They don't belong to natural language in any way. In example (1) the agent is me: "I". So why should I use the passive except for joking. The Active sentences whose agent or (doer) is "I" are completely meaningless when they are turned into the passive form. Besides this, When the agent is known like in examples (2) "Ahmed" and (3) "Ali", why then change the sentence into the passive. The agent is the only concerned one (with liking bananas) on the one hand, and (respecting one's parents) on the other.

Recapitulation

Not all the active sentences with objects should be altered into the passive just because they have the most important tool for change, namely the object. Even if the grammatical rule says that (The object in the active sentence becomes the subject of the passive sentence), we should be aware of the fact that the language is used to express idea, not to follow rules. Every rule has Exceptions. And some sentences are never acceptable as passive because they naturally belong to their active form. We only use the passive form if we guess that the thing receiving the action (object) should be focused on or it is more important than the thing doing the action (subject).

By + agent

Now let's talk a little about the (by + agent) students usually like to use at the end of every "passive" sentence. Any sentence in the passive, which extremely needs (by + agent) at the end, is more an active than a passive one. In other words, it should absolutely be expressed in the active form. If the agent were so needed that we had to mention it in the passive sentence using (by + agent) why not just keep the sentence in the active form and (stop looking for our left ear with our right hand; the right ear is rather easy to reach [Moroccan Expression]).. The agent (or the doer) is not needed in the passive sentences otherwise why converting the sentence into the passive then?! We use the passive sentence basically when the agent or the doer is unknown or a common agent such as (people, someone, everybody and so on). Sometimes the agent is accepted to come last in some contexts. In this case the (by + agent) is vital to shed some more necessary needed meaning to the utterance, but not in all contexts. Look at this example.

When the gravitation law was discovered by Isaac Newton, a new gate in the field of scientific discoveries opened....

In sentences such as this one the use of (by + agent) is natural. We don't feel that it is forced in. See this one, too:

When my father was informed (by my mother) that the television set had been turned off by the cat, he got astonished and didn't just believe it.

In this complex sentence the speaker uses (by + agent) twice, the first seems forced because the informer here could be any one. It is not the subject matter; whereas the second
seems normal and even necessary because the agent here is the pivot around which the whole story revolves.

All in all, the passive voice use is more suitable when the agent is vague, unimportant, unknown or simply doesn't add any meaning to the sentence. That's to say, the sentence will be expressive without it and that's why we obstinate to mention it at the end of the sentence using the phrase (by + agent).

**Why the passive?**

People usually prefer to express themselves or transmit ideas using the passive voice for many reasons. The major reason, however, is the fact that the "deeds" are more interesting than the "doers". And when they use the active declarative positive sentences, it is because the doer really matters. It's like this. Check the examples below:

- **These Ones**
  1. "Progress is made in the field of science." (who made the progress? Here the passive form is more expressive because many parts participate in the making of the progress in question).
  2. "The poem was beautifully written." (Here the speaker is more interested in the poem than in the poet. He who has written the poem, he has written it in a beautiful way).
  3. "My watch has been stolen." (This is an informative sentence made in the passive voice because the victim is sorry for his stolen watch and doesn't care much about the thief because either the agent (thief) is unknown (which is probably the case here) or the victim of the theft is expressing his sorrow about the watch he no longer has).

- **And these**
  I. **SPEAKER 1**: "The window pane was broken." (PASSIVE VOICE)
  II. **SPEAKER 2**: "The boy broke the window pane." (ACTIVE VOICE)

In these two sentences the speakers have got different intentions. The first is rather concerned with the fact that the window pane was broken no matter who had broken it. He is not really interested in the (doer) that's why he makes "THE WINDOW PANE" his subject (of interest); whereas the second speaker is accusing the boy of breaking the window pane. He is more concerned with the agent (doer) than with the fact that the window pane was broken.

Because the first speaker's intention was to talk about the event, he ignores the doer. He might not be able to identify who the doer was! But in general, we understand that the doer doesn't matter for him or he would have said "SOMEONE broke the window pane." The second speaker on the other hand emphasizes the boy as the doer and not anybody else. He begins the sentence with "The boy" to focus on the accused, (the agent), notably the boy.

From what has been stated above; I guess, now, we can explain why not all sentences in the active voice can be transformed into the passive and vice versa. Each form (active or passive) reveals certain meaning which the other cannot, according to one's intentions and matter of interest.

Now! As we can justify the rule that "NOT ALL ACTIVE SENTENCES ARE CONVERTIBLE INTO THE PASSIVE", we can easily understand that this rule is referring to the normal sentences which have the normal structure (Subject + Verb + Object). In what
concerns the Imperative sentences, I'm very doubtful about their flexibility to convey the same meaning when they are forced into the passive "dress". Still I'll try to show how things may look like when they are just a group of words gathered together to mean NOTHING. So do please concentrate on the following...

Imperative

As far as the sentences "Do it" and "Let it be done!" are concerned, The difference is somehow huge in relation to our topic namely THE PASSIVE VOICE. However, there is something called the passive reflexive. Here is an example:

**ACTIVE**: Don't let the others cheat you.
**PASSIVE**: Don't let yourself be cheated.

But I don't think this has any relationship with what you asked about. Anyway, Let's first begin from the beginning and have a glance at "Let":

*Let it be!* means, (allow to be quiet).
*Let me be!* means (don't worry me). As you can see these expressions are used independently. They have nothing to do with the passive voice.

1. **Before we can tackle this tough problem Let's recapitulate first**:
   1. To put an active sentence in the passive, we normally need an object which can shift our attention from the subject being futile. The object should be more powerful than the subject of the active form so that we could make the transition into the passive with confidence and make the operation logical and meaningfully justified:
      - Someone wrote the message in English."Someone" is a common subject which doesn't deserve its position at the outset of the sentence because it is futile as a bearer of meaning. It's weak in relation to its position. Thus The message was written in English is the most recommended because it is the most suitable.
   2. The object should be the center of interest for the speaker:
      - The problem was solved (by us) thank God. The agent (us/we) is not the center of attraction but the problem effectively is. The speaker may be one of those who solved the problem.
   3. **Not all active sentences are to be put in the passive voice**:
      - I have a car! This sentence is to be used in its active form but never in the passive even though it has an object (a car).
   4. The choice in the use of either passive or active forms depends on one's purpose and intention. [See the examples above]

Sentences in the imperative, on the other hand, are generally complicated in transforming into the passive: As for ! (Do it!) ! If it is necessary to put in the passive, The only possible correct way, then, is (It is to be done!) <=> {It must be done (by you or by anybody else) } <=> [(Let it be done!* ) does not reflect the order in the imperative "Do it!"]
In (Do it!) the agent is defined and "S/he, they» are the addressee(s). If The speaker (The one who wants it to be done) doesn't want to appoint a specific person in a group for the job, he may just say (It is to be done <> It must be done <> It has to be done no matter who will do it!). In this case what interests the speaker most is the fact that S/He wants the thing done; that's all!. He doesn't care much about the "He" or "she" who would do it.

I hope things are clear enough now!

**TRANSITIVE or INTRANSITIVE verbs**

As far as the sentences "He has been gone"* and "He has been rewarded". The verb to go (gone) is different in grammar from the verb (reward) and other ones. I mean that the verb (go) is intransitive whereas (reward) is transitive (it needs an object).

**Examples**

- **Part One:** Normal sentences in the passive.
  - Ali has been rewarded. | Someone has rewarded Ali. (because Ali has achieved a good work for instance)
  - Ali has been rescued. | Someone has rescued Ali. (because Ali was in danger.)
  - He has been invited to a wedding party. | Someone has invited Ali to the wedding party.
  - Ali has been spoken to. | Someone has spoken to Ali.
  - Ali has been sent a letter. | Someone has sent Ali a letter.
  - Ali has been understood. | We/They have understood Ali.

- **Part two:** Now have a look at these examples for comparison:
  - Ali has been gone.* (incorrect because there is no agent to make Ali (go). We cannot say: Someone has gone Ali*. Do you think this has got meaning? No, nothing! It is impossible.)
  - Ali has been had.* (incorrect because this sentence is only a group of words put in the syntactical form of the passive voice but conveys no meaning. Someone has had Ali.* No, no, no!)
  - Ali has been come.* (Intransitive verbs and some transitive ones as well cannot make passive sentences; like : (go, be, have, come, become, leave, fly, etc)

- **Part three:** Sentences which are grammatically correct and have meaning of some sort but are hard to accept as correct sentences except in some specific contexts.
  - Ali has been played. (Ali is not a game to play; we cannot say in the active form: (Someone has played Ali*). Nevertheless, if "Ali" is written as shown (between converted commas) to mean a name of a game, it's OK! but it is not sustainable.)
  - Ali has been drunk. (Ali is not something to drink. The subject needs more explanations so that it is taken for a drink.)
  - Ali has been read. (Ali is not a book or a magazine. Yet Ali should be a famous writer so that this sentence would have meaning. [Shakespeare has been widely read. It's OK because we mean the plays and poems Shakespeare wrote but not his person. With Ali it is different because he is not known as a writer. And this creates some ambiguity!)

- **Part Four:** Ambiguous sentences
  - Ali has been given something. | Someone has given Ali something.
Now I'd like you to put these sentences in the passive voice:

1. A car has run over my dog.
2. Somebody bought the last copy of the book yesterday.
3. Everybody thought he was crazy.
4. I send them to Paris.
5. People here say that tea is better for health than coffee.

Now this is how they look like after the transformation into the passive voice:

1. My dog has been run over by a car. (Normally (by a car) could be mentioned here on purpose to stress the fact that it was not a bus or tractor but a car).
2. The last copy of the book was bought yesterday.
3. a. It was thought that he was crazy (*).
   b. He was thought (to be) crazy.
4. They are sent to Paris.
5. a. It is said here that tea is better for health than coffee. (*)
   b. Tea is said, here, to be better for health than coffee.

It is said...

In the following part I will concentrate on the two sentences marked thus: (*) because the others are somehow OK. You can see that it was only the consequence of lack of concentration on your part. But the two sentences in question are misleading even for native speakers.

Have a look at this

Broadly speaking the passive voice is evoked only because the subject of the active is not satisfying as a bearer of interesting significance for it is either vague or unknown. That's why the use of the passive is compulsory to get rid of the burden of the subject that adds no interesting information to the sentence in general.

Everybody thought he was crazy.

The subject in this sentence is vague: Who is this everybody?! Nobody knows. It represents the majority of people. We should use the passive so as to get rid of it. It is not important at all because we can say the same sentence with better meaning in the passive. Now those who use 'It is/was' as you did yourself don't really change anything. They only replaced a vague subject "Everybody" by another vague subject notably the introductory 'It'. This won't help!!!! Now look at these sentences (one is yours) and compare yourself:

1. It was thought that he was crazy.
2. He was thought (to be) crazy.

According to you, which of the two looks more expressive?! (I think you should agree with me that it is the second which is the best). Now let's skip to the next:

- People here say that tea is better than coffee for health.

Look at your passive sentence above (*). What's the problem with it? It changed the vague subject "People" with another vague subject "It". Both of them are unidentified and unknown. Now you see that it is a little bit redundant. If we transformed it into the passive this way, look:

- Tea is said to be better than coffee for health. (OR)
Tea is said to be better for health than coffee.

What do you think? This is the best, isn't it? The subject is "Tea" which is part of the original sentence. It is not vague... like "it", is it?

**With phrasal verbs**

Most of our students are misled when the action of the sentence is based on a verb + preposition. They often forget about the preposition.

- Someone was looking at Ali.
- Ali was being looked at.

In the sentence above “A car has run over my dog” there's also a (verb + preposition) which only when they are together that they mean what it is intended. In other words: when run is alone as a verb it means something different from that it means when the preposition "over" is joined to it (Check your dictionary). Its passive form is “My dog has been run over”. Dropping the preposition is harmful to the meaning of the sentence. Most students drop the "preposition" because they just cannot imagine that that preposition is part of the verb, thus (phrasal verb).

**Direct and indirect objects**

The principle which governs the transformation of an active sentence with two objects into the passive form is to use the personal object your subject in the active sentence. e.g.

- He sent her a letter.

Here we have got the two underlined words in the sentence as indirect and direct objects. We can use both of them as subjects of the passive sentence as follows:

1. She was sent a letter.
2. A letter was sent to her.

According to you which of the two is the best. You may have thought of the first as the best and that's true. The rule says that a sentence with two objects the personal one (or the indirect subject in this sentence) is the first to be used as subject of the passive sentence.

Put the following sentence in the passive voice:

**ACTIVE VOICE:** Somebody showed the farmer the new tractor.

**PASSIVE VOICE:** _______________________________________.

The personal object is the indirect object "the farmer" in this sentence. So it is more usual in spoken as well as in written English to use it as subject of your passive sentence.

Have a look at the following sentence:

- Someone gave Dolly a box of rags.

1            2

Here you may think of two possibilities either you start with (1) or with (2) but the choice here is vital:

1. A box of rags was given to Dolly.
2. Dolly was given a box of rags.
In theory both are possible; yet the indirect object looks much more usual as the subject of the passive verb. So the best and the most accurate one is unquestionably number 2.

Practice

- *Choose the best answer*

1. She is teaching us English on Saturdays.
   a. English is being taught to us on Saturdays.
   b. We are being taught English on Saturdays

2. He gave Leila all the books.
   a. Leila was given all the books
   b. All the books were given to Leila

3. Someone has taken the children to the circus.
   a. The children have been taken to the circus.
   b. The circus has been taken to.

4. The boy asked his mother embarrassing questions.
   a. Embarrassing questions have been asked.
   b. The mother was asked embarrassing questions.

5. Some Students are performing the new play at the local theatre.
   a. The new play is being performed at the local theatre.
   b. The local theatre is being performed at.

6. Someone sold this old hat to my wife.
   a. This old hat was sold to my wife.
   b. My wife was sold this old hat.

7. Someone introduced me to Leila's husband.
   a. I was introduced to Leila’s husband.
   b. Leila’s husband was introduced to!

8. People showed the lady the way to my house.
   a. The way to my house was shown to the lady.
   b. The lady was shown the way to my house.

9. Someone invited the governor to the children's party.
   a. The governor was invited to the children's party.
   b. The governor to the children's party was invited.

10. They handed the boy a prize and sent him to his parents.
    a. A prize was handed to the boy and sent to his parents.
    b. The boy was handed a prize and sent to his parents.

**KEY (SEE BELOW)**

**The Progressive Tenses**
I have chosen the continuous tenses, to talk about the transition from the active to the passive forms in connection with the tenses of the sentences, to focus on the fact that the passive of the past, present and future continuous is the least used among the other tenses because there's some heaviness in using the continuous form of "to be", e.g.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Continuous Tenses</th>
<th>Active Voice</th>
<th>Passive Voice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Past continuous</td>
<td>She was cooking a meal.</td>
<td>A meal was being cooked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Present continuous</td>
<td>They are pushing the car.</td>
<td>The car is being pushed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These tenses are avoided because they require the continuous form of to be as I mentioned previously. Still other forms of the continuous passive form are rarely used. Here are examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other Tenses</th>
<th>Active Voice</th>
<th>Passive Voice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(A)</td>
<td>They will be selling the house.</td>
<td>The house will be being sold.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B)</td>
<td>She would be making cakes.</td>
<td>Cakes would be being made.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(C)</td>
<td>They have been selling a cow.</td>
<td>A cow has been being sold.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(D)</td>
<td>He had been singing a song.</td>
<td>A song had been being sung.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, sentences in continuous sentences are somehow complicated to transform into the passive that's why they are rarely used.

It's useless now, I think, to remind you that we are dealing with the transformation of "possible" active sentences into the passive voice. I tried to show the limits of this transformation previously in part I and no w I'll try to intensify your awareness of the fact that not all active sentences are automatically convertible into the passive voice and not all passive sentences have the same rules. There still are things we didn't talk about fully. Let's present them this way:

**The use of Prepositions**

Rare are those among our students who notice the preposition in a sentence when putting it in the passive form. As I have mentioned this common mistake before, I'll only manage to show, through examples, how things should be mended in cases as such:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active Sentence</th>
<th>Passive Sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They have spoken to me.</td>
<td>I have been spoken to.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone broke into my office.</td>
<td>My office was broken into.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They threw the empty bottles away.</td>
<td>The empty bottles were thrown away.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somebody is looking for you.</td>
<td>You are being looked for.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They were talking about you.</td>
<td>You were being talked about.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone listened to the new song.</td>
<td>The new song was listened to.*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you can see, all the prepositions are given a place in the passive sentences. Imagine those passive sentences void of prepositions! Their true meaning will be completely lost, I'm afraid!

**The Passive Infinitive**
There isn't really much to say here except for what you already know notably the verb after a modal or auxiliary is always in the infinitive without "to". In other words: (Auxiliary + infinitive combinations) are made passive by using a passive infinitive. To illustrate this, we may put it this way:

\[ \text{[MODAL / AUXILIARY + BE + Past Participle]} \]

**Now here is some practice for you:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active Voice construction</th>
<th>Passive Voice construction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You can do it.</td>
<td>It can be done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You must respect the law.</td>
<td>The law must be respected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They will contact you.</td>
<td>You will be contacted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They would arrest him.</td>
<td>He would be arrested.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somebody might see the little boy.</td>
<td>The little boy might be seen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone may repair the car.</td>
<td>The car may be repaired.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You ought to clean the desk.</td>
<td>The desk ought to be cleaned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone is going to discover the error.</td>
<td>The error is going to be discovered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**EXERCISE**

*Put the following sentences in the passive voice:*

- They kicked him out.
- They have to see the film.
- He must have cut off his finger.
- They could visit the temple today.
- She used to call him "Pit".
- They could see the lady stealing food.

**The Interrogative Passive**

Questions also are sometimes exposed to transformation when necessary. They respect the same rules. When the agent is not important to mention, it's better to speak or write your questions in the passive. Here are some examples:

- What must we do about this? - What must be done about this?
- What questions did they ask? - What questions were asked?
- Did they tell her the story? - Was she told the story?
- Has anyone dusted that blackboard yet? - Has that blackboard been dusted yet?
- Will anyone tell him about the test? - Will he be told about the test?

Like affirmative sentences the interrogative ones are transformed in the way that (be) is present to accomplish the operation.

**The negative and intero-negative passive**

If the above explanations were clear enough for you, any other explanations will be useless except for something very important about the negative sentences I'd like to tell you.
Look at this:

- My sister did not cook that meal.

In this sentence the underlined "not" is shown and you can see that the sentence is obviously negative. In cases where the "not" appears in the sentence, you only have to be careful about the tense of the passive verb while reconstructing your sentence. Here is it in the passive voice: That meal was not cooked by my sister. The "not" is transported to the passive sentence as you have been shown previously. Why did I mention this? It is simply because, in some other negative sentences, the "not" cannot be noticed because of its camouflage. Look!

-Nobody can read your handwriting.

This sentence looks affirmative because the phrase can read doesn't look negative because, once again, the word "not" doesn't appear in the sentence and the verb "read" is not preceded by (auxiliary + not) as we normally expect a sentence in the negative form to be; but still the sentence is negative. This form often misleads our students because they cannot notice that the subject carries the negative element in the sentence: Nobody ... Thus the sentence in the passive should be as follows:

- Your handwriting can not be read.

And this one, too:

- Didn't they allow you to go in?

This sentence is both negative and interrogative in one. You have to think about how it will look like in the passive voice. O.K! Let's do that together!

EXERCISE

Put the following sentences in the passive voice:

1. Where did they park the car?
2. No one has given out the news yet.
3. Must not we do the quiz?
4. Have you already done it?
5. Doesn't she tell you the truth?
6. No one has broken the window.

More than one passive

Some compound or complex sentences can bear more than one passive voice. In written English the passive is used to save the changing of the subject of a clause sequence. The passive is concise in expressing long winding sentences. We'll come back to this important mechanism lately but now, let's try first with a sentence made of two passives:

They had stolen all the gold before they set fire to the shop.

(1)                                        (2)

If we managed to put the two sentences in the passive voice separately; what would this manoeuvre come out with?!
(1) The gold had all been stolen.
(2) Fire was set to the shop.

Now let's join them together with the linker before which was already given in the active form.
Our new compound passive sentence is this:

The gold had all been stolen before fire was set to the shop.

(1)                                        (2)

Three Passives

What about a complex sentence with three passives, for instance? This is an example:

-Nobody would have asked him his identity card if they had told him what places he had to ovoid.

(1)     (2)   (3)

-He wouldn't have been asked his identity card if he had been told what places had to be avoided.

(1)     (2)   (3)

In this example the sentence contains three passive operational parts which should be handled carefully. The complication resides in finding the object in each part of the active sentence which allows the transformation to be done safely. You have to bear in mind that operations as such are more delicate and dangerous for the meaning if things weren't perceived from different angles. Needless to repeat here that the possibility to put one clause (part) in the passive doesn't automatically allow you to do the same for the rest except if they hold the elements necessary for the transition to the passive. Let's do this example for more practice:

- It must have shocked him that his boss informed him that she no longer appreciated his work style.

(1)   (2)    (3)

- He must have been shocked to be informed that his work style was no longer appreciated.

(1)     (2)    (3)

The importance, in priority, is for the meaning rather than for the form. Is the sentence in the passive greatly reflects its original copy in the active form?! That's what counts the most. Yet this importance would never be reachable but on condition that the grammatical syntactic structure of the passive sentence is irpreachable.

Complex Sentences

If we talked a little bit now about the mechanism of making long winding active sentences short and expressive concisely thanks to the passive voice? This is how the passive works effectively for the language is good when it expresses a lot of information in a few words. This is the job of the passive in sentences like the following. Compare:

(1) The police arrested him. They questioned him about the charges against him, which he denied firmly.

(2) He was arrested, questioned about the charges against him and denied them all firmly.

Verb + Adverb Combination
The order of words in the passive respects the original order used in the active sentence except for the placement of the adverb of manner. Look at these examples and notice the placements of the adverbs of manner:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active Sentence</th>
<th>Passive Sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They talked about the boy proudly.</td>
<td>The boy was proudly talked about.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They understood him well.</td>
<td>He was well understood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They advised her to treat the children kindly.</td>
<td>She was advised to kindly treat the children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He was driving the car carelessly.</td>
<td>The car was being carelessly driven.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are a lot of other details about sentences in the passive voice. I think it's better to deal with them in a general review of what has been stated above.

**Distinguishing the Active from the Passive voice.**

The simple active sentence is normally a [SUBJECT + VERB + OBJECT] e.g.

"Someone uses this computer."

As you see, SOMEONE is the "agent" or the "doer" who uses the computer. But because it adds no information to the sentence as it could be anyone. In this case we'd better omit it using the PASSIVE FORM:

"This computer is used."

The speaker here is not interested in the WHO uses the computer but rather in the action itself, i.e. in the fact that the computer is used no matter "who" uses it.

In order to be able to rightly decide if a given sentence is active or passive, you have to look for the doer. If the doer - who does (or is doing or has done or did or was doing or will do ...) the action - is at the beginning, then the sentence is ACTIVE. If the doer is absent or is preceded by "by" at the end of the sentence, the sentence is in the PASSIVE voice. With practice you will never be in need of such explanations, you can do them yourself; i.e. you'll be a doer yourself.

**Practice:**

*Which of the following sentences are Active and which are passive? Circle the correct answer*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Sentence</th>
<th>Active</th>
<th>Passive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Jennifer looked for her grandfather.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>The grandfather was out looking for food.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Was she really worried about his absence?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>The old man might be taken to hospital.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>He ought to have eaten too much.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>He could have been kicked out of a restaurant.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>He was extremely hungry and cold.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Old people have to be taken care of.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. Jennifer should not let him need anything.  
10. My parents have always been well looked after.  
11. Jennifer has to be more careful.  
12. Grandparents have more experience than we have.  
13. We are taught their past in our schools.  
14. The old people are often mistreated.  
15. Leila likes to keep her grandmother company.  
16. We like to listen to their amusing long stories.  
17. Old people used to be young once.  
18. They tried to make life easier and peaceful for us.  
19. They have to be given much attention.  
20. The children will become old people in few years time.  

Epilogue

‘More than enough is too much.’ This is true for everything. The passive voice cannot be an exception. When some students are transforming sentences into the passive voice, they do it to the least trivial modification. Some web-sites even incite the students to do the transformation from the active voice to the passive voice mechanical. They meant to show them every little detail concerning the transformation, but they forget that more than enough is most of the time hurting.

**ACTIVE:** Joe eats an apple.  
**PASSIVE:** An apple is eaten by Joe.*

What is authentic or natural about the second sentence? The students should be made aware that not all sentences in the active voice (Subject + verb + object) automatically go passive (Object + [be + participial] + [by + agent]). There are borders that one mustn’t transgress otherwise the language becomes rigid and communicatively sterile.

- *The Smiths sold the house.*

This sentence according to ‘mechanicals’ is to be transformed into the passive voice this way:

- *The house was sold by the Smiths.*
Whereas the sentences will make a gigantic difference if done the most appropriate way,

- *The smiths’ house was sold.*

Other anomalies, that the preachers of mechanical transforming don’t notice, are the fact that some students may apply the rule to all sorts of sentences provided that they have got an object. The sentences, once put in the passive voice, become awkward, meaningless and even stupid. Scrutinize this one.

- *I read Hamlet.*

According to the rule, the sentence transformed becomes,

- *Hamlet was read by me.*

This is absolutely unacceptable. In natural English this utterance seems indigestible on the whole. Take the other one,

- *Ali likes chips.*

This is another anomaly. The mechanical reconstruction of the sentence gives us a weird meaning that the English tuned ear rejects categorically.

- *Chips are liked by Ali.*

Some sentences are healthier in the active voice why then damage them by changing their constructions into the passive voice?!

- *Someone gave my daughter a cookie.*

Without hesitation the students hurry to take “A cookie” as subject and their sentence looks something like this

- *A cookie was given to my daughter by someone.*

Let’s operate on this sentence right now. The first thing that strikes us is the tumour “by someone” that impedes the body of the sentence to act freely and normally as an accurate sane sentence. What more information does the phrase “by someone” adds to the meaning of the sentence?! It is a burden and has to be removed. Next:

- *A cookie was given to my daughter.*

In natural English when there are two objects in the sentence, notably the direct and the indirect objects; it is usually the PERSONAL one that goes for the subject of the passive voice construction. The next anomaly is this and the correction will look like this:

- *My daughter was given a cookie.*
I guess the obsession to just transform any active sentence into the passive voice becomes a threatening disease. The more it is ignored, the worse it develops. A simple surgery operation will render the blood in the vein of the dying sentence.

Before we go to the operation block, let’s first stress the fact that some attractive well-built active sentences will simply become disabled or carcass once they are turned into the passive switch. So, let’s bear in mind that not all the sentences in the active voice go automatically passive; it generally is fatale. Moreover, it is not the active that gives birth to the passive voice. The passive voice form has a completely independent identity.

At the Surgery Office

- "The cat ate my sandwich."

This sentence openly says that the cat is the criminal that commits the transgression. It says the cat is the suspect number one. It plainly accuses the cat of eating the sandwich. This accusation is normally based on two things or on at least one

1. Ocular witness: Someone saw the cat eating the sandwich.
2. Logical interpretation of events or cautious investigations:
   - There was no one else in the kitchen (where my sandwich was) except for the cat.
   - Its paws’ imprints were fresh on the table where the poor sandwich lies peacefully.
   - Any other indication that accuses the cat with solid proof.

But if it happened that I couldn’t prove anything about the implication of the cat in the eating of my poor sandwich or that the cat had nothing to do with the crime at all, I’d prefer to express what troubles me the most notably the fact that,

- “My sandwich was eaten."

I mean that my concentration, in my wrath, goes on the fact that my sandwich was massacred regardless, of course, of who did it. I cannot but show my deep fury about what happened to my sandwich. The agent, be it the cat, the dog, the boys, the girls, the Satan, doesn’t interest me so why mention it at all. What counts, after all, is not who ate the sandwich; it is the very truth that it was eaten by someone else that counts most for me.

The agent or the doer in a passive voice sentence is generally ignored because we are not interested in who does the action but rather in the action itself regardless of who does it. According to me, when I choose to use the passive voice, I decide to hide or not to mention the doer or the agent. Normally this is so because I don’t know the doer of the action or that the action is what matters for me most, or the doer is not worth mentioning for it adds no important information to my utterance, or eventually because I don’t want to unveil the identity of the agent. In our sandwich case, I chose to use the passive voice because I don’t want to hurriedly accuse anyone of committing the infraction of eating a sandwich that is not destined to him, her or it.

Many students prefer to mention the agent at the end using the preposition “by”. I personally don’t recognize this except for special cases we’ll talk about later on. The use of the agent at the end of the sentence preceded by “by” is too much demanding for both the listener and the utterance itself; as it may end up in a superfluous style. If in my case I were sure the cat was the doer, my sentence would sound this way:
- My sandwich was eaten by the cat.

This is really hard to admit as expressive natural language. Now compare it to the following:

- The cat ate my sandwich.

This one, as you see, is more natural, economical and very clear. The active verb makes the sentence livelier and easily assimilated as well as meaning bearer.

**The inevitability of the agent after “by”**.

Before we can take the risk of omitting “by + agent” phrase after very passive form of the sentence, we have to take into consideration many factors.

First, we have to make sure that the agent is not really that important. Besides this we have to be aware that not all agents in passive sentences are optional.

Second, if the agent is the only one responsible for the action, it should be mentioned as it is in the active form.

- Edison invented the gramophone.

Nobody else but Edison discovered the theory that makes the gramophone feasible so he and only he was the inventor. In the passive voice, Edison mustn’t be ignored or overlooked as he is as important to the meaning of the sentence as the action itself is. Thus,

- The gramophone was invented by Edison.

Though the second sentence is too winding for an perfect natural sentence, it is compulsory to use “by + agent” at the end because the doer is special. Nevertheless the active from is the most suitable in cases where the agent is so important that it must be mentioned.

Third, it is not only the preposition “by” that works in all circumstances. Look at this one for instance,

- Snow filled the garden.

This sentence is in the active voice. The agent is “snow”. If it was to be put in the passive, it would have to be treated this way,

- The garden was filled.*

This sentence is not complete thus it is inaccurate because it lacks significant information that only the agent can provide. Here we cannot ignore the agent at any rate as it is as imperative as the action itself. We should mention the doer but not by using the phrase, “by snow”. The preposition, “by” here doesn’t work. It’s not right; we should use the preposition, “with” instead. Therefore the accurate form of the sentence goes like this,

- The garden was filled with snow.

**Diagnosis results**
We can logically deduce that when the agent does the action deliberately, the preposition “by” is to be used, but when the agent is forced to do the action or was not responsible for doing it, it is preferable if not compulsory to use the preposition “with”.

- The house walls were painted by an outstanding artist.
The outstanding artist did the painting on purpose, not by accident.

- The house walls were covered with mud.
The mud didn’t deliberately cover the walls but it was forced to do so. I mean by accident. This however is not a rule yet it works as such.

Contemplate this example,

- A knife cut the bread.

In relation with what we have been discussing previously, what preposition is more suitable in this case, “by” or “with” to refer to the doer?

I guess it is “with” that works perfectly here because the one who broke the bread is not the knife, but it is the person who uses the knife to break the bread. Thus, the knife, which really broke the bread, didn’t do it deliberately but it was forced to do so. Consequently, the passive sentence is this,

- The bread was cut with a knife.

Well, what do you say about the following,

- The woman cut the bread.

Here, unlike the agent in the first sentence, the doer did it purposely or perhaps premeditatedly. The woman, if we have to mention her, we obligatory should introduce her “by” using the preposition “by” not “with” as we did with “the knife” sentence.

- The bread was cut by the woman.

All depends on what we want to say.

There are always two approaches that govern our speech vis-à-vis using the passive or the active voices. What we know and what we want to say are two different things. And they are what directs us either towards pronouncing our piece of information in terms of “I am not sure who, but what happened is this....” or towards uttering our statement in terms of the “know who!”.

- The vase was broken.

Here the speaker uses the passive voice because he doesn’t know who broke the vase or he wants to keep that piece of information for him. Another supposition is that he was the doer but he cannot decide who it was, the cat, the parrot or the dog. In all cases, the speaker doesn’t want to bother himself with who did the action since the action is what matters most.
The other approach, however, is that of the one who seeks for the doer in order to be punished. He would either pronounce it this way,

- The parrot broke the vase.
Or this way,
- The vase was broken by the parrot.

In both uses, the speaker unveils the villain and insists on accusing it. In order to be able to say it this way, the speaker must have seen the doer, the parrot, otherwise, his declaration is pure defamation. On the other hand, it would be preferable for him to announce the statement in the active form as he has no reason to keep the divulging of the doer to the end. So the first statement is the most suitable one. The second one, however, can be justified. The speaker wants to draw attention to the fact that it is the parrot which broke the vase not anyone else. Using the statement

- *The vase was broken by the parrot.*

I guess it would be suitable, if it is necessary to mention the agent, to use the active form. The active voice is more economical and the agent – the villain - has not to be masked.

- *The parrot broke the vase.*

On the other hand, the statement in the passive voice pours more ink and says almost the same thing but with missing information provided that “by + agent” is detrimental in natural language,

- The vase was broken.

Nevertheless, if the agent is to be mentioned the sentence gets even longer.

- *The vase was broken by the parrot.*

Because we have an idea about who the doer is; and we got sure it was the parrot, not the cat, in this case it is advisable to use the active voice as it is more expressive, more active and more accurate in the end.
## Key

Key to the exercise on page – 4 -

1. Your last book was admired.  
2. The door is being knocked at.  
3. A car has been stolen.  
4. We were bought sandwiches.  
5. The exam-papers are handed out.  
6. You will be shown my house.  
7. The lorry could be repaired.  
8. The floor is being swept.  
9. The law must be respected.  
10. English is spoken all over the world.  
11. He has been made a headmaster.  
12. The bank was broken into.  
13. I was sent a beautiful card.  
14. All the exercises should be done.  
15. My children are being looked after.  
16. Your son was being told never to ride that bike.  
17. The letter has been being typed.

### Key to the exercise on pages 17 - 18

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Sentence</th>
<th>Active</th>
<th>Passive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Jennifer looked for her grandfather.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>The grandfather was out looking for food.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Was she really worried about his absence?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>The old man might be taken to hospital.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>He ought to have eaten too much.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>He could have been kicked out of a restaurant.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>He was extremely hungry and cold.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Old people have to be taken care of.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Jennifer should not let him need anything.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>My parents have always been well looked after.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Jennifer has to be more careful.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
12. Grandparents have more experience than we have.  
13. We are taught their past in our schools.  
14. The old people are often mistreated.  
15. Leila likes to keep her grandmother company.  
16. We like to listen to their amusing long stories.  
17. Old people used to be young once.  
18. They tried to make life easier and peaceful for us.  
19. They have to be given much attention.  
20. The children will become old people in few years time.  

Key to the exercise on pages (12) and (13)

1. She is teaching us English on Saturdays.  
   b. We are being taught English on Saturdays  
2. He gave Leila all the books.  
   a. Leila was given all the books  
3. Someone has taken the children to the circus.  
   a. The children have been taken to the circus.  
4. The boy asked his mother embarrassing questions.  
   b. The mother was asked embarrassing questions.  
5. Some Students are performing the new play at the local theatre.  
   a. The new play is being performed at the local theatre.  
6. Someone sold this old hat to my wife.  
   b. My wife was sold this old hat.  
7. Someone introduced me to Leila's husband.  
   a. I was introduced to Leila’s husband.  
8. People showed the lady the way to my house.  
   b. The lady was shown the way to my house.  
9. Someone invited the governor to the children's party.  
   a. The governor was invited to the children's party.  
10. They handed the boy a prize and sent him to his parents.
IN WRITING...

**Why should I avoid the passive voice?**

**Introduction**

Many teachers are not resolute vis-à-vis the question of using the passive voice in writing. Most of them even avoid mentioning the passive voice style while teaching writing. This is either because they regard it as a minor issue and argue that there are other focal things in writing which disserve much more concentration, or because they wouldn’t like their students to be ‘politicians’ for the reason that politicians are said to be known for the excessive use of this dead style.

Still, there are teachers who advise their students to avoid using the passive voice while writing because they deem it is redundant and bulk. Nonetheless, they keep silent about the “why not?” To my mind, they would at least let them know that this self-imposing style on the students is confusing and message breaking down when the reader cannot decide who did what?! It brings about ambiguity and misunderstanding.

**Active Vs Passive Voices**

Now, let’s verify to what extent the advice is worth taking. I actually don’t contest that the passive voice is sometimes indigestible being a heavy and information hiding style; yet I am objecting on the over-generalization only. The problem lies in the fact that the passive voice is very often irreplaceable. If our students believed, this way, that the passive voice in writing is a fatal misuse of the language, they would try to wipe it out; which is not quite a wise initiative for the fruitfulness, the imaginativeness and the flexibility of the language styles.

It is true that all verbs are normally active and they should always be so. When the sentence is active, it is the subject which performs the action; whereas in the passive sentence, the subject receives the action and this creates some bewilderment for the readers as they miss important information, notably the agent who did the action:

**Examples**

- *The cat ate my sandwich.* (Active)

Here the subject is the doer or the agent "the cat". It is the cat thus who performs the action of eating. The sentence is active and lively and more informative. There is no ambiguity and the reader won’t be wondering who did what?!

On the contrary,

- *My sandwich was eaten by the cat.* (Passive)
With this sentence we prefer to focus on the fact that the sandwich was eaten and the doer is of a secondary role in our attitude towards the situation. Here the doer is not so important to talk about initially why then mention it. This is to be avoided, sure. It is the sandwich in this sentence which is the subject but it is not the doer. It doesn’t perform the action. It rather receives it. And here is all the most disturbing point about this discrepancy and the weakness of the passive voice as clear meaning bearer.

Comments

This sentence is really awkward and less inspiring because the doer is there but it is not given the right function or place in the utterance. "My sandwich was eaten" is far more expressive no matter who did that. With this sentence I mean to show that I am not interested in who ate my sandwich. On the contrary my focus goes on the fact that it was eaten no matter who did it.

The mentioning of the doer in a passive sentence is not recommended only but in some very few special cases such as "Electricity was discovered by Edison" otherwise the statement looks too wordy and dead as an informative. This is therefore what I want the teachers to explain to the students so as not to be suspicious about the ability of the nice problem solving rich passive voice to create and highlight meaning.

Recapitulation:

If the doer is known, it is recommended to use the active voice. "X did Y". But suppose the "X" is unknown, unidentified or irrelevant i.e. not worth mentioning. In this case the most fitting style however is the passive voice, "Y was done" by the "X" which I cannot name for one of the previously mentioned reasons. Therefore, if "the cat" was surely the doer, it would be required to use the active form. However, if the doer is unknown to me (like someone, people etc) or all that matters for me is the fact that my sandwich was eaten no matter who did the action, it would be suitable and wise to use the passive voice but without "by the cat".

I’d like to make it graspable from this point that we should always be equitable in our approaches. Both active and passive voices are tools to express ideas the clearest and the easiest way. So let’s start with the toughest question ever:

- Why should I avoid the passive voice?
- Why should the passive voice be avoided? (By all of us)

First we must decide which passive voice we are talking about. There are cases in which using the passive voice is inappropriate and almost dim. I mean the cases in which the agent is there, effective, relevant and has to be mentioned:

1. Maria’s skin damage is being examined by a professional aesthetician.*
2. A professional aesthetician is examining Maria’s skin damage.

In cases as such the passive voice would be worse as a style choice. It would look wordy, rambling and redundant. Look at example one, it is almost ridiculous. The second sentence, however, is more authentic and natural. This is perfectly what works well and this is what I am trying to say. Using the passive voice should be used in writing but appropriately. There are situations in which only the passive voice is the master.
1. Many of our projects have been sabotaged.
2. The manager has sabotaged many of our projects.

In the first sentence the speaker didn’t mention the doer so as to avoid troubles by intentionally avoiding talking about the responsible for the sabotage. Opposing to this, the second sentence speaks plainly about the actor behind the sabotage. All in all passive voice statements do not naturally lead to untrustworthiness or hiding information, but it is much more difficult, when you use the active voice, to avoid mentioning the doer.

Politicians’ style:

Politicians are known for their excessive use of the passive voice and there surely is a reason for that. Perhaps they want to hide some information or just they want to be less explicit. But this doesn’t mean if they used the active voice, they wouldn’t be real politicians or they’d be more explicit. This is totally relative if not wrong.

The passive voice is not the only style which can hide, more than clearly display, important information. The active voice can do better.

STUDY THESE STATEMENTS:

1. "We were told by some reliable people that water in this region is not contaminated".*
2. "It was proven by our laboratories’ reports that water in this region is clean".*
3. "Water in this region is said to be the purest in the country".*

As you may notice; these statements are wordy which proves that sometimes, the passive voice use is pure mockery and a waste of time, effort and information. Since we are talking about water as a vital substance why not name precisely who told, who proved, who said. I mean the real doers or performers of the action. Those tellers and reporters have to be mentioned initially as they are more important that the topic in question. It is the public who will decide if the doers are trustful or not. In this case, suppose we want to convert the passive voice into the active voice can gain some amelioration of the style.

COMPARE THEM WITH THESE

1. "Some reliable people told us that water in this region is not contaminated".
2. "Our laboratories proved that water in this region is clean".
3. "People say that water in this region is the purest in the country".

Here, the active voice is used to set right the defiance of the passive voice but in vain. There is no evidence here that the active voice is any better. There is no difference between passive and active voices as long as both styles hide the same major required information. It is the specification and straightforwardness that characterize the active voice. If it cannot shoulder it, let the passive voice do the task more beautifully and more imaginatively.

1. "We were told that water in this region is not contaminated".
2. "It was proven that water in this region is clean".
3. "Water in this region is said to be the purest in the country".

I believe that the passive voice here is the most suitable style because of many reasons; one of which notably is that "laboratory reports are usually written in the passive voice".

Story telling style:
We should also acknowledge to the passive voice the craft of breathtaking suspense heightening when the readers are attracted to be involved to make some interpretation effort while reading a story. The readers are more involved when you bombarded them with ambiguous but well designed and rightly built statements. They would accept the challenge and follow you to eventually find out "who did what".

- "It was a chilly winter midnight when the window pane was broken and some foot steps were heard in the corridor".
- "Three women were killed in the grimy village motel during the night".
- "A sharp shriek was heard in the vicinity".
- "Many of those precious paintings were stolen from the gallery".

If the novice writers want to venture with this, they should be failure complex immune because the perfect use of such style is always achieved after an accumulation of a series of unsuccessful experiences.

Conclusion

Generally even in bad styles we have to choose the best. I mean the “less bad”. The passive voice here in incontestably the best. Therefore the accusation against the passive voice as a dissimulator of information or as a superfluous style in this case has to be taken back. There should always be taken for fact that the best style is the one which carries the appropriate meaning in the appropriate way.

On the whole, be it active or passive, it is the situation or the expression which dictates the right speech. I dare not advise anybody anything for fear they should miss the beauty and robustness of both the active and the passive voices when they are used as it should be.

© Abdessalami On_Line

http://madrasati2010.bravehost.com/pv/