

## Passive Voice and Expletive Constructions

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George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language"<sup>1</sup> and Strunk and White's book *The Elements of Style*<sup>2</sup> urge writers to avoid using the passive voice. Yet Orwell's essay shows us by example that the passive voice is sometimes appropriate. Also, some of the sentences that Strunk and White criticize in their discussion of the active voice were not in the passive voice. One was an expletive construction. The use of the passive voice or an expletive construction is not bad grammar, nor is it always bad writing. In this article, I'll explain how and when to use them.

### The Passive Voice

Grammatical voice describes the relationship between a subject and its verb. If the subject is the agent of the verb (ie, the verb expresses something the subject is doing or being), then the verb is in the active voice:

- I ate the chocolate.

In that example, *I* is the subject, *ate* is the verb, and *chocolate* is the direct object. If I want to rewrite the sentence so that the chocolate becomes the subject, I have to put the verb in the passive voice. A verb in the passive voice expresses something that is done to the subject. The agent of the verb may then be put into an adverbial prepositional phrase that modifies the verb, or it may disappear altogether:

- The chocolate was eaten by me.
- The chocolate was eaten.

In English, we use the past participle of the verb, along with an auxiliary verb, to express the passive voice. (Note that other languages have completely different ways of expressing the passive voice). The past participle of an English verb typically has an *-ed* ending, but there are many exceptions (for example, paid, kept, drunk, forgotten). The auxiliary verb used to express the passive voice in English is always some

version of *to be* (is, are, was, were, has been, etc). The timing of the action is expressed by the tense and aspect of the auxiliary verb, which may thus have one or more auxiliary verbs of its own:

- The chocolate is being eaten.
- The chocolate will have been eaten.

Notice that we say "*I* ate the chocolate," but "The chocolate was eaten by *me*." When a pronoun is the subject of a verb, it is in the nominative case (I, you, he, she, it, we, they, who, whoever). When the pronoun is a direct or indirect object of a verb or the object of a preposition, it is in the objective case (me, you, him, her, it, us, them, whom, whomever). So the direct object of a verb is in the objective case in English, but when the direct object of an active-voice verb becomes the subject of a passive-voice verb, it goes into the nominative case:

- She loved him.
- He was loved by her.

The passive voice enables you to say what was done to someone or something but without specifying who did it. That's useful if the identity of the agent is unknown or unimportant or if you want to draw attention away from the agent. For example, someone might say "mistakes were made" instead of admitting "I made mistakes."

Because the passive voice indicates that a direct object is being treated as a subject, only transitive verbs can be used in the passive voice. If a sentence has no direct object, it cannot be rewritten in the passive voice:

- He sleeps. (There is no direct object to turn into the subject of a sentence.)

If an English verb is really in the passive voice, there will be some form of the verb to be and a past participle. If either

is missing, the verb isn't in the passive voice. Here are some examples of uses of the active voice that some people might mistake for passive voice.

She <i>has to</i> eat.	Modal verb
He <i>had been waiting</i> .	Past perfect progressive tense of intransitive verb
I <i>am thinking</i> .	Present progressive tense of intransitive verb
They <i>feel</i> sick.	Linking verb; mental verb with experiencer subject
He <i>looks</i> tired.	Linking verb; mental verb
We <i>became</i> friends.	State of being verb
<i>It is</i> raining.	Expletive construction
<i>There is</i> work to be done.	Expletive construction

It's ironic that Orwell insisted, "Never use the passive where you can use the active." In that same essay, he showed how emotionally powerful the correct use of the passive voice could be. (Note that you don't necessarily have to repeat the auxiliary [eg, *is* or *are*] if it applies to all of the verbs in a series):

Defenceless villages **are bombarded** from the air, the inhabitants **driven** out into the countryside, the cattle **machine-gunned**, the huts **set** on fire with incendiary bullets: this **is called** pacification. Millions of peasants **are robbed** of their farms and **sent** trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this **is called** transfer of population or rectification of frontiers. People **are imprisoned** for years without trial, or **shot** in the back of the neck or **sent** to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this **is called** elimination of unreliable elements.

Orwell's use of the passive voice in this passage serves an important moral purpose. It focuses the reader's concern on the people who are suffering and reminds the reader that the moral significance of an act resides in the nature and expected consequences of the act, not in the identity of the agent. Yet one could also use the passive voice for an immoral purpose, such as to set up a smokescreen that allows an agent to continue committing evil acts with impunity.

According to the American Medical Association *Manual of Style*, the active voice is generally preferred if the agent is mentioned in the sentence; however, the passive voice is preferable

if the agent is unknown or irrelevant:

- He was shot in the abdomen and within 10 minutes was brought into the emergency department.<sup>3</sup>

### Expletive Constructions

The word *expletive* comes from the Latin word *explere*, which means *to fill*. In linguistics, a syntactic expletive is a word that is meaningless in itself but performs some syntactic role in the sentence, usually as a dummy subject.

- It is raining.
- There is no cause for alarm.

Neither of the verbs in these two examples is in the passive voice. Although there's a form of the verb *to be*, there's no past participle. Note that the verb in a "there is/there are" construction has to agree in number with the complement!

- There is a rose in Spanish Harlem.
- There are no children here.

In Strunk and White's discussion of their recommendation to use the active voice, they give the following example of a bad sentence:

- There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground.

Instead, they recommended the following:

- Dead leaves covered the ground.

I do like the latter sentence better, but the former wasn't an example of the passive voice. It was a needlessly long sentence that began with an expletive construction. Expletive constructions are grammatical, but they do often represent an opportunity to omit needless words.

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