

Passive Verbs and How to Avoid Them

Definitions:

Active Verb: A verb in which the subject does the acting.

Ex. Sam hit the Ball.

Passive verb: A verb in which the subject is acted upon by another force.

Ex. The ball was hit by Sam.

What's so bad about passive verbs?

1. Generally speaking, passive verbs require extra words and can often confuse your reader more than active verbs. In the example above, the active sentence used only four words while the passive sentence used six. The passive sentence also required an extra prepositional phrase which means your reader has to process more information. It may not seem so bad with a simple example like "The ball was hit by Sam," but passive verbs can confuse readers more easily in an academic setting where sentences and phrases tend to be longer.
2. Active verbs are more likely to communicate the action better. Choosing a strong active verb can show your reader the main action that you want to focus on.

Ex. 1 Eph. 5 was used by Smith to prove the complimentary viewpoint.

Ex. 2 Smith proved the complimentary viewpoint using Eph. 5.

In example one, the main verb of the sentence "was used," does not really focus on the action occurring within the sentence. In contrast, Ex. 2 focuses on the main action of the sentence, "proved," and communicates the same idea to the reader in a more concise way.

Are Passive Verbs Always Wrong?

Strictly speaking, no. Passive verbs are not always wrong. A writer may use a passive verb form when he wants to emphasize the object rather than the subject. A writer may also use a passive verb form when the author of the action is not known. However, any time you can use an active verb instead of a passive verb, the active verb is preferred. Many students use an overabundance of passive verbs which overwhelm and confuse their reader.