Writing Tip #6
Active vs. Passive Voice

Introduction
In virtually all writing, using active voice makes your work stronger and clearer than if you use passive voice. Learning to recognize active and passive construction in your own writing takes some practice, but it will improve the quality of your writing every time.

What is Voice?
Voice is a grammatical construction of a sentence. It refers to the position of the action verb in a sentence relative to the actor (subject) and the recipient of the action (object).

In active voice, the verb declares the action of sentence all on its own, it doesn’t need help:

“He lost the wallet.”

Passive verbs need a helping verb to convey the action. They sit around waiting for another verb to come along and give them a boost, usually a past tense version of the verb ‘to be.’

“The wallet was lost by him.”

These kinds of passive constructions are easy to see and correct. Check out the following examples:

Passive: A decision was made by the dean.
Active: The dean made a decision.

Passive: An investigation was conducted by the police.
Active: The police conducted an investigation.
Passive Construction
Another way to spot passive voice construction is to examine who or what is doing the action (subject), and who or what is receiving the action (direct object). If the direct object comes in front of the verb, then the sentence is passive:

“The clothes were worn by Susan”

In this sentence, “clothes” is the direct object of the verb “were worn.” The real subject of the sentence is the actor: Susan. This is a passive voice sentence.

Unidentified Subject
Sometimes the subject of the sentence is left out of a passive construction. These are harder to recognize, but the rule above still applies: who or what is doing the action?

“The workers were fired.”

Who did the firing? The implied subject is “the company,” but it’s not mentioned. Nevertheless, this is a passive construction.

To identify passive voice:
1. Look for “to be” + a past participle (usually, but not always, ending in “-ed”).
2. See if the object, the receiver of the action, sits to the left of your verb.
3. Following the verb, ask “by whom?” The answer is the subject, and it should be to the left of your verb.

To eliminate passive voice:
Switch the sentence around to put the subject (the doer) in front of the verb (the action). If the subject isn’t in the sentence, add the subject.

Practice
All of the sentences below are passive. Make them active. If you have trouble, come see us in the writing center. We’re here to help.

*The metropolis has been scorched by the dragon’s fiery breath.*

*It is argued that dogs are more faithful pets than cats.*

*Marketing links were being established.*
Active vs. Passive Voice

The working class was marginalized.

You are fired.

Women were not treated as equals.

The troops have been withdrawn.

When to use Passive Voice
There are instances when passive voice is preferred over active voice. Writers use passive voice because they wish to highlight the action instead of the agent.

Passive voice is used in scientific writing and when the agent is obvious, unimportant, or just unknown. For instance, scientists use passive voice when describing methods.

“The sample was spun at 1000 g in a centrifuge. After the pH was adjusted, the supernatant was placed on an agarose gel and subjected to an electric current.”

For more information on how to decide which voice to use, see

http://www.utoronto.ca/ucwriting/passive.html
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/539/1/
http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/passivevoice.html

For more information visit us at:

coe.unm.edu/current students/coe-graduate-student-writing-studio.html