

4.2: Verb or Adjective – Understanding Passive (or don't just say “avoid *be* and avoid passive”)

Use of the passive voice is one way we have in English of emphasizing and refocusing information. English has fairly fixed word order, with the subject first, then the verb, and then other stuff (direct object, prepositional phrase, adjective, adverb, etc.). But perhaps you want to foreground the direct object rather than the subject. You can't just put it up front to emphasize it (as in Latin or Russian or other languages with case marking endings that indicate the functions of the nouns); rather, in English you can passivize the sentence by moving the direct object into the subject position, which then triggers several other grammatical operations:

- the subject appears at the end of the sentence in a *by*-prepositional phrase
- a form of auxiliary *be* comes in
- the main verb changes into the past participle
- and then you can optionally delete the *by*-phrase

Here are some examples. Note that the tense is always maintained; passive doesn't affect the tense:

The eagle ate the rat.

The rat was eaten by eagle.

The police are arresting the suspects.

The suspects are being arrested by the police.

So those are the logistics. For the most part, we all do it – make active and passive sentences – easily and effortlessly. But sometimes we are advised to avoid the use of passive in writing (though that was it right there). It is viewed (passive again) as obscuring the agent (which it can do, but maybe that's what you want to do), as being too wordy, or as being too vague (which again, could be the point – that's why we use it in speech, when we don't want or don't need to be specific about who is doing something, about who or what the agent is). In student writing, I often see attempts to avoid passive (or what someone thinks is passive) turn into much more garbled, awkward sentences. If students can easily identify passive, however, then they can make good rhetorical choices about whether they want to use passive or not.

The suggestion to avoid passive is often lumped in with another suggestion to avoid all forms of *be*. And since forms of *be* are necessarily a part of the passive verb string, that includes passive. But this avoidance of any form of *be* can also lead to some bad substitutions when students simply comb through their writing for all forms of *be* and substitute a not-quite-synonym like *exist*. Getting students to think about the verbs in their writing is useful. And not using *be* quite so much is probably a good idea. (It is the most common verb in English, according to the *Oxford English Corpus*. *The* is the most common word overall, followed by *be*.) Some writing instructors note that *be* (and its forms) does not add enough “umph,” or it simply equates (*this is that*), or that it's too general. Considering other verbs and considering some reorganization

that leads to the use of other verbs can perhaps improve the writing. But just scanning for *be* or for passive and then substituting generally makes things worse. It's really not that time-consuming or difficult to discuss passive and the forms of *be* and doing so will have other pay-offs since students will then have a clearer understanding of this complex syntactic operation, of the unconscious knowledge they already possess about how it works grammatically and rhetorically, and then, if its use or overuse really is an issue in student writing, students will have the tools to revise.

Another problem with simply telling students to avoid the use of passive is that they'll see plenty of passive out there in "good writing," and also their intuitions will tell them that it's not only not a bad aspect of the language, but can be a very useful one. Here's a nice list <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/passive-voice/> of some of the myths about passive in writing. I will not send you to LanguageLog's many discussions of the passive (which is mostly about pointing out misidentification of passive - a bit too *gotcha* - but if you must take a peek, here's the link <http://www.lel.ed.ac.uk/grammar/passives.html>)

So recognizing passive is straightforward: a form of *be* plus the past participial form of a verb. Always. (Ok, I should know better than to say always, but almost always - except when *be* is *get*: *She got hit by the ball.*) And you can check it by creating the corresponding active sentence. Every passive has an active counterpart (though not the other way around since there are plenty of sentences that do not have a passive counterpart. Only sentences that have direct objects can even be passivized.) (You can review past participles in Lesson 2.4.)

Passive exercises by Beth Keyser are here, <http://teachling.wvu.edu/node/60>, included in a lesson on auxiliary verbs. Much fun will be had by you and your students. :)