**Defining the passive voice**

A passive construction occurs when you make the object of an action into the subject of a sentence. That is, whoever or whatever is performing the action is not the grammatical subject of the sentence. Take a look at this passive rephrasing of a familiar joke:

*Why was the road crossed by the chicken?*

Who is doing the action in this sentence? The **chicken** is the one doing the action in this sentence, but the chicken is not in the spot where you would expect the grammatical subject to be. Instead, the road is the grammatical subject. The more familiar phrasing (why did the chicken cross the road?) puts the actor in the subject position, the position of doing something—the chicken (the actor/doer) crosses the road (the object). We use active verbs to represent that “doing,” whether it be crossing roads, proposing ideas, making arguments, or invading houses (more on that shortly).

Once you know what to look for, passive constructions are easy to spot. Look for a form of “to be” (is, are, am, was, were, has been, have been, had been, will be, will have been, being) followed by a past participle. (The past participle is a form of the verb that typically, but not always, ends in “-ed.” Some exceptions to the “-ed” rule are words like “paid” (not “payed”) and “driven.” (not “drived”).

Here’s a sure-fire formula for identifying the passive voice:

**form of “to be” + past participle = passive voice**

For example:

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

*When her house was invaded, Penelope had to think of ways to delay her remarriage.*

**Not every sentence that contains a form of “have” or “be” is passive!** Forms of the word “have” can do several different things in English. For example, in the sentence “John has to study all afternoon,” “has” is not part of a past-tense verb. It’s a modal verb, like “must,” “can,” or “may”—these verbs tell how necessary it is to do something (compare “I have to study” versus “I may study”). And forms of “be” are not always passive, either—”be” can be the main verb of a sentence that describes a state of being, rather than an action. For example, the sentence “John is a good student” is not passive; “is” is simply describing John’s state of being. The moral of the story: don’t assume that any time you see a form of “have” and a form of “to be” together, you are looking at a passive sentence.

Need more help deciding whether a sentence is passive? Ask yourself whether there is an action going on in the sentence. If so, what is at the front of the sentence? Is it the person or thing that does the action? Or is it the person or thing that has the action done to it? In a passive sentence, the object of the action will be in the subject position at the front of the sentence. As discussed above, the sentence will also contain a form of be and a past participle. If the subject appears at all, it will usually be at the end of the sentence, often in a phrase that starts with “by.” Take a look at this example:

*The fish was caught by the seagull.*

If we ask ourselves whether there’s an action, the answer is yes: a fish is being caught. If we ask what’s at the front of the sentence, the actor or the object of the action, it’s the object: the fish, unfortunately for it, got caught, and there it is at the front of the sentence. The thing that did the catching—the seagull—is at the end, after “by.” There’s a form of be (was) and a past participle (caught). This sentence is passive.

Let’s briefly look at how to change passive constructions into active ones. You can usually just switch the word order, making the actor and subject one by putting the actor up front:

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

becomes

*The dragon has scorched the metropolis with his fiery breath.*

becomes

*When her house was invaded, Penelope had to think of ways to delay her remarriage.*

becomes

*After suitors invaded her house, Penelope had to think of ways to delay her remarriage.*

To repeat, the key to identifying the passive voice is to look for both a form of “to be” and a past participle, which usually, but not always, ends in “-ed.”

Clarity and meaning

The primary reason why your instructors frown on the passive voice is that they often have to guess what you mean. Sometimes, the confusion is minor. Let’s look again at that sentence from a student’s paper on Homer’s The Odyssey:

*When her house was invaded, Penelope had to think of ways to delay her remarriage.*

Like many passive constructions, this sentence lacks explicit reference to the actor—it doesn’t tell the reader who or what invaded Penelope’s house. The active voice clarifies things:

*After****suitors****invaded Penelope’s house, she had to think of ways to fend them off.*

Thus many instructors—the readers making sense of your writing—prefer that you use the active voice. They want you to specify who or what is doing the action. Compare the following two examples from an anthropology paper on a Laotian village to see if you agree.

(passive) *A new system of drug control laws was set up.* (By whom?)

(active) *The Lao People’s Revolutionary Party set up a new system of drug control laws.*

Here’s another example, from the same paper, that illustrates the lack of precision that can accompany the passive voice:

*Gender training was conducted in six villages, thus affecting social relationships.*

And a few pages later:

*Plus, marketing links were being established.*

In both paragraphs, the writer never specifies the actors for those two actions (Who did the gender training? Who established marketing links?). Thus the reader has trouble appreciating the dynamics of these social interactions, which depend upon the actors conducting and establishing these things.

The following example, once again from that paper on The Odyssey, typifies another instance where an instructor might desire more precision and clarity:

*Although Penelope shares heroic characteristics with her husband, Odysseus, she is not considered a hero.*

Who does not consider Penelope a hero? It’s difficult to tell, but the rest of that paragraph suggests that the student does not consider Penelope a hero (the topic of the paper). The reader might also conceivably think that the student is referring to critics, scholars, or modern readers of The Odyssey. One might argue that the meaning comes through here—the problem is merely stylistic. Yet style affects how your reader understands your argument and content. Awkward or unclear style prevents your reader from appreciating the ideas that are so clear to you when you write. Thus knowing how your reader might react enables you to make more effective choices when you revise. So after you identify instances of the passive, you should consider whether your use of the passive inhibits clear understanding of what you mean.