

## THE PASSIVE VOICE

*“The difference between an active-verb style and a passive-verb style--in clarity and vigor--is the difference between life and death for a writer.” William Zinsser*

**The grammar outlaw:** The Passive Voice

**The grammar crime:** While using the passive voice is not grammatically incorrect, it makes your writing more impersonal and static.

Sometimes professors accept the passive voice, for example, in laboratory write-ups; English professors prefer, however, that you use the active voice.

The active voice is strong, dynamic, and direct. The active voice is also easier to understand because it explains who is doing the action.

**Question:** How do we know if a sentence is using the passive voice?

**Outlaw**

The horse was seen by Carolyn.

- **The subject:** the horse
- **The action:** seeing
- **The acting agent** (who acts?): Carolyn
- The subject and the acting agent are **not** the same. Therefore, this sentence is in **passive voice**.

**Rehabilitated**

Carolyn saw the horse.

- **The subject:** Carolyn
- **The action:** seeing
- **The acting agent** (who acts?): Carolyn
- The subject and the acting agent **are** the same. Therefore, this sentence is in **active voice**.

**Question:** How do we catch passive voice outlaws?

We look for sentences in which the subject and the acting agent are not the same. In these cases, the subject of the sentence does not act, but it receives the action of the sentence.

**Clues:**

- Sentences in the passive voice include any form of the verb “to be” and the past participle of the verb.
- If the “acting agent” is mentioned in the sentence, “by” precedes it.

**Question:** How do we rehabilitate passive voice outlaws?

In most cases, you can rephrase the sentence so that it is in the active voice.

- If the acting agent is in the sentence, try to change it to the subject of the sentence.
- If the acting agent is not in the sentence, try to determine the acting agent of the sentence. If you cannot, you may be unable to convert the sentence to the active voice.

**Outlaw**

Kat was told by the teacher to pass in her exam.

- **The subject:** Kat
- **The action:** telling
- **The acting agent** (who tells?): the teacher
- The subject and the acting agent are **not** the same. Therefore, this sentence is in **passive voice**.

**Rehabilitated**

The teacher told Kat to pass in her exam.

**Outlaw**

Jonathan is liked by his peers.

- **The subject:** Jonathan
- **The action:** liking
- **The acting agent** (who likes?): his peers
- The subject and the acting agent are **not** the same. Therefore, this sentence is in **passive voice**.

**Rehabilitated**

His peers like Jonathan.

Jonathan's peers like him.

**Outlaw**

The iron was used by Nancy.

- **The subject:** the iron
- **The action:** using
- **The acting agent** (who uses?): Nancy
- The subject and the acting agent are **not** the same. Therefore, this sentence is in **passive voice**.

**Rehabilitated**

Nancy used the iron.

**Outlaw**

The path is chosen by Jordan.

- **The subject:** the path
- **The action:** choosing
- **The acting agent** (who chooses?): Jordan
- The subject and the acting agent are **not** the same. Therefore, this sentence is in **passive voice**.

**Rehabilitated**

Jordan chooses the path.

**Outlaw**

The meeting was brought to order.

- **The subject:** the meeting
- **The action:** bringing
- **The acting agent** (who brings?): unknown
- The subject and the acting agent are **not** the same. Therefore, this sentence is in **passive voice**.

**Rehabilitated**

We cannot rehabilitate this sentence unless we can discover who brought the meeting to order.

Possibilities:

Someone brought the meeting to order.

The president brought the meeting to order.

Kyla brought the meeting to order.