Active and Passive Verbs

Writers are often advised to use active verbs because they are more direct, more emphatic, and more concise than passive verbs. Passive verbs are necessary, however, when writers do not know the “doer” of the verb, the “doer” of the verb is not important, or there are too many “doers” of the same verb.

Active Verbs

If the subject of a sentence “does” the verb (the action), then the verb is active. In the examples below, the subjects are in bold, and the verbs are in italics. Notice that the subjects are “doing” the action of the verbs.

- The company enforces two environmentally-friendly policies, carpooling and recycling.
- Americans can reduce their risk of cancer, heart disease, and diabetes by following the American Cancer Society's nutrition guidelines.
- Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence between June 11 and June 28, 1776; individuals from the thirteen united States of America signed it on July 4, 1776.

Passive Verbs

If the subject receives the action of the verb, the verb is passive because the subject of the sentence is not “doing” the verb (the action). Passive verbs are often preceded by helping verbs (is, am, are, were, was, been) or followed with by. In the following examples, the subjects are in bold, and the verbs are in italics. Notice that the subjects in the sentences are not “doing” the action; they are receiving the action.

- Extensive research is being done to determine which gene in the body causes autism, a neurological disorder that usually strikes children within the first two years of their lives. (There are too many “doers” of the verb to mention.)
- The United Nations Charter was signed on June 26, 1945 by representatives of 50 countries. (The “doers” of the verb are less important than the object receiving the action.)
- In 1955, Rosa Parks, an African-American seamstress, was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama for refusing to give her bus seat to a white passenger. (The “doer” of the verb is not known.)

Although writers are often encouraged to use active voice, in some fields (especially the sciences) and in some instances, passive voice is acceptable and may even be preferred.