

How to Understand the Difference Between Passive and Active Sentences

First, it is important to know what passive and active sentences are before any comparisons can be drawn

Passive and **active** sentences are incredibly useful to the study of persuasive and/or emotive writing, and are a typical feature of newspaper reports.

- For example, an active sentence may be, "*The man helped the girl*", whereas the passive equivalent would be, "*The girl was helped (by the man)*". It is the writer's deliberate variation between these sentences that allows them to mould their reader to interpret their words in their desired way. If the writer uses the **passive form ("The girl was helped")**, he clearly aims for his audience to immediately sympathise with the girl and the way she's been treated or a example of the girl being helped. On the other hand, if **the man** is foregrounded in the sentence (as in the **active form, "The man helped the girl"**), the treating or the behaviour of the man takes place in this sentence, but on after all this is the natural sight of the man "helping the girl" so we can understand that the man helped the girl in his natural behaviour. This sentence can be also be told like "the girl was helped by the man". This sentence makes the same meaning as the other but in a different way. This is changed into active voice. This is why the distinction between passive and active sentences is so necessary in newspaper reports, as they help to convey the meaning.

Once you have explained a passive or active sentence has been used, it is then necessary for you to explain why the sentence is passive or active

This is where it gets complicated. As you probably know, if you're studying English, average, simple sentences consist of a combination of three things: subject, verb, and object; subject, verb and adverb; or subject, verb and complement. The **active** form of the aforementioned example has a **SVO** (Subject Verb Object) structure: "The man" (S), "helped" (V), "the girl" (O). All **active sentences** follow this pattern, except for those that exchange the object for an adverb or a complement. **Passive sentences**, on the other hand, are a little more complicated. Since the sentence is switched around, one would assume that a passive sentence would go Object - Verb - Subject. However, the original object **becomes** the subject, so this is not possible. Instead, a new term is used to refer to the original object ("the man"), and it is known as an **agent**. Therefore, the sequence for a passive sentence becomes as follows: "The girl" (subject), "was helped" (verb), "by the man" (agent) -**S.V.Agent**. Alternatively, passive sentences can omit the agent and merely consist of subject and verb: "The girl (S) was helped (V)".

Tips

- In short:
 - **Active sentence = S.V.O., S.V.Adv., or S.V.Complex**
 - **Passive sentence = S.V., or S.V.Agent**

- To determine whether or not something is an agent, it is important to note where the blame is placed. If the word(s) in question put the blame on someone/thing, or can begin with "by...", then it is an agent, and the sentence is passive.
- Note the reason the writer uses a passive or active sentence.
- For example, active sentences can be used to foreground the person or thing that causes the events, shaping the reader's opinions towards them. They could also be useful to allow the reader to see something from a person's perspective. (e.g., "I did this", rather than "this was done".)
- Active sentences are commonly used in newspaper articles to make the writer seem objective and non-intrusive, as they make the text appear factual and detached, although in reality they often also help to disguise subjective influences on the reader.

Warning

- Never be tempted to presume that a passive sentence follows an OVS sequence. This is never the case.
- Don't forget to explain the point you're trying to make, rather than just stating that a passive sentence is used.

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