

Passive Voice Mini-Lesson

What is Passive Voice?

- A sentence whose action is passive
 - It moves like any other sentence
 - But it's not as active as it could be
- Compare these sentences
 - **The tree was struck by lightning.**
 - **Lightning struck the tree.**
- How does the first differ from the second?
 - Which is passive voice?

Verbs

- **“was” vs. “struck”**
 - What is “was”?
 - **To-be verb like: is, are, am, had, been, were, be, was**
 - “By” as an indicator
 - To-be verbs are not “bad”
 - But, they present a lazy way out for the writer
 - Rather than thinking up something more interesting, or a more reader-friendly way to construct the sentence
 - That is, passive voice is writer-friendly (easy for you to write) but not reader-friendly (creates boring sentences for them to read)
 - ‘To be’ verbs do not represent “excellent” writing
 - What is “struck”?
 - Transitive verb
 - Past tense, but the tense does not detract from the action
- **In passive voice** (the first sentence), the apparent subject actually functions as an object, a recipient of the action
 - Passive voice forces the object of the sentence/action (tree) into the role of subject
 - Passive voice therefore breaks traditional English structure of SVO (sub.-verb-obj.)
- **In active voice** (the second sentence), we see that the subject is actually lightning
 - The subject (lightning) is acting upon the object (tree), performing action (struck) on the tree.

Other Examples

- Yesterday, the lawn was mowed.
 - I/We/He/She/They/You/Someone mowed the lawn yesterday.
- An error has occurred.
 - I/You made an error.
- Odysseus was a poor leader, shown by his refusal to listen to his men.
 - (As) A poor leader, Odysseus refused to listen to his men.

Fixing Passive Voice (Getting Rid of the “Fluff?”)

- **In working to improve your sentences,**
 - Always look to the verbs first (before adding adjectives, adverbs, etc.)
 - The verbs you choose inherently dictate the structure of the sentence
- Choosing a different verb.
 - The market was filled with fruit stands.
 - The market teemed with fruit stands.
 - The war was long—it lasted for 8 years.
 - The war lasted for 8 (long) years.
- Get rid of –ing endings
 - I was walking home from school.
 - I walked home from school.
 - The curtains were fluttering in the wind.
 - The curtains fluttered in the wind.
- Move the adjective in front of the noun
 - Beyoncé is one of the greatest artists of all time and was responsible for changing music forever.
 - The great (artist) Beyoncé changed music forever.
- Change the order of the sentence
 - *Hamlet* was written by Shakespeare.
 - Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*.
 - The letter had been left on the counter by my brother.
 - My brother left the letter on the counter.
 - The entrance exam was failed by over one-third of the applicants.
 - Over one-third of the applicants failed the entrance exam.