ACTIVE/PASSIVE VOICE

Consider the following sentences:

1. The monkey played the piano.
2. The piano was played by the monkey.

Which sentence sounds better to you? Neither sentence is technically wrong (in the way, for example, run-on sentences or sentence fragments are wrong), but you’ve probably noticed that the first sentence reads better than the second. Perhaps you think that the writer of the second used too many words to say something simple or that (s)he wasn’t being direct enough. The second sentence is a passive-voice sentence; its verbs are written in the passive voice. The first sentence is an active-voice sentence; its verbs are written in the active voice. What do active sentences look like? In active sentences, the person or thing that performs the action described in the sentence usually is the subject of the sentence:

Active: “The monkey played” — “the monkey” is the subject who did the action, the one who “played the piano.”

You can recognize passive sentences by their verbs. Verbs in passive sentences consist of a form of the verb “to be” (such as “is,” “are,” “was,” “were”) and the past participle of another verb (like “made,” or “played”).

Examples: Beer is chugged by the college professor.
That article in the Bulletin was written by the angry student.
A lot of money was made by his grandfather.

In passive sentences, the person or thing performing the action described in the sentence is not the subject of the sentence. For example, in the first sentence above, “the college professor” is the one chugging the beer, but “beer” is the subject of the sentence. That person or thing does not act but instead is acted upon by something or someone else. In fact, the word “by” often appears somewhere in the sentence, though sometimes it is not expressed, merely understood. One way to recognize passive-voice sentences is to look for the “by the...” phrase after the verb or add such a phrase after the verb to see if it completes the meaning of the verb.

Examples: PASSIVE: Giggles were heard. There is no “by...” phrase, but someone heard those giggles. Giggles were heard BY MY GRANDMOTHER?? Giggles were heard by the RA???

PASSIVE: The walls were painted with a hideous orange color. BY MY GRANDMOTHER?? BY THE LANDLORD??

CHOOSING PASSIVE VOICE

In most nonscientific writing, active voice is preferable to passive for the majority of sentences because it is clearer and more direct. In scientific writing, passive voice is more acceptable since using it allows one to write without using personal pronouns or the names of particular researchers as the subjects of sentences. This practice helps to create the appearance of an objective, fact-based discourse that is not limited by individual perspectives.
Passive voice may also be effective in other situations when the agent performing the action is obvious, unimportant, or unknown. In such cases, passive voice serves to highlight the action and what is acted upon instead of the agent performing the action.

Evidence of prehistoric parachutes was discovered last year.

Police were put on alert after con artists were spotted on campus.

Results will be published in the next issue of the journal.

Experiments have been conducted to test the hypothesis.

A Professor's Advice on the Passive Voice:

1. Certain forms of written communication (scientific lab reports and technical communications, for example) require the use of the passive voice because the agent of the action being described is less significant to the discussion than the procedures themselves, and thus it is unnecessary and redundant for the experimenters or the initiators of the process to continually make reference to themselves in the report. The passive voice also conveys the objectivity of the researcher, who does not contaminate the results of an experiment by intruding into the pure reactions of agents under examination. A scientist reading a lab report which says:

   I measured the diameter of the rod with a Vernier caliper.

would automatically revise the sentence by eliminating the first-person pronoun and transforming the verb into the passive voice:

   The diameter of the rod was measured with a Vernier caliper.

2. In nontechnical or nonscientific writing, on the other hand, the intentional blurring of the subject undertaking the action being described is seldom useful, often ineffective, and sometimes downright duplicitous; therefore, writing instructors frequently discourage students from using the passive voice. In addition to obscuring the agent responsible for the action being described in the sentence, the passive voice has two other negative effects on a writer's prose: it increases the abstractness of assertions (thus reducing their directness and immediacy) and contributes to pomposity and verbosity.

   \[
   \begin{array}{ll}
   \text{Passive Voice} & \text{Active Voice (preferred)} \\
   \text{The assets of the estate have been fully invested and are being reviewed periodically.} & \text{Bank officers have fully invested the assets of the estate and are reviewing them periodically.}
   \end{array}
   \]

NOTE: The passive voice here reflects officialese; the active voice clearly tells the reader who is doing what with what.
Passive Voice                                          Active Voice (preferred)

The money needed for my first year of college was acquired through working at a bank.

I earned the money for my first year of college working at a bank.

NOTE: The passive voice only makes pompous and abstract the very concrete problem of earning money for school.

Passive Voice                                          Active Voice (preferred)

The book was read by the present writer with great interest.

I read the book with great interest.

NOTE: The writer here turns himself into the pompous “present writer” for the purpose of adding four unnecessary words to a simple, straightforward assertion. Whenever the sentence includes the agent performing the action, usually preceded by the preposition “by” (“by the present writer”), one simply makes that agent the subject of the active verb (“The present writer [I read]”).

3. However, sometimes the passive voice is also appropriate when the agent is of no importance: “If a person is found guilty, he can be sent to jail.”

4. In the hands of a careful and skilled writer, the passive voice can be used both responsibly and effectively.

“No one, after all, can be liked whose human weight and complexity cannot be, or has not been, admitted.”

--James Baldwin