

Tightening Passive Sentences

Sentences in English can usually be expressed in either of two forms: active or passive:

ACTIVE	<u>Agent</u> The horse	<u>Action</u> pulled	<u>Object</u> the cart.
PASSIVE	<u>Object</u> The cart	<u>Action</u> was pulled	<u>Agent</u> by the horse.

Active sentences present events in a natural order: an **agent** (or “doer”) does something to an **object**. *Passive* sentences reverse this natural order, confusing the agent-object relationship. For this reason, passive sentences are longer, less direct, and sometimes harder to understand than their active counterparts. During revision, you can often sharpen your writing by changing passive sentences into active forms.

How to Revise Passive Sentences

1. First see whether the passive sentence contains an **agent**.
Ask who or what did the action of the sentence.
If you find an agent, move it to the front part of the sentence and move the object (what the agent acts on) to the last part of the sentence:

<u>Object</u> The ball	<u>Action</u> was hit	<u>Agent</u> by Mary.
<u>Agent</u> Mary	<u>Action</u> hit	<u>Object</u> the ball.

Ask who or what did the hitting. The answer is Mary. Notice that you will also have to cut down the verb (here *was* is deleted) and get rid of words such as *by* that are used in passive sentences to mark the agent. When you finish your revision, read it aloud to see that it makes sense and means what you want it to.

2. Sometimes a **passive sentence** will not contain an **agent**. To revise such sentences, you must select the appropriate agent and insert it at the front of the sentence, moving the object to the last part of the sentence and changing the verb:

Passive with no agent:

Congress was intentionally misled.

Revision, using an appropriate agent:

Oliver North intentionally misled Congress.

Of course, if you cannot think of an appropriate agent, then the sentence will simply have to remain passive. But using active sentences in which agents are clearly identified can often help make your writing stronger and more direct.

Exercise A:

Revise each of the following sentences to put it in an active form.

Example Sentence: The river had been polluted by the oil refinery.

Revision: The oil refinery polluted the river.

1. The accident was caused by the captain's insistence upon his ship's right-of-way.
2. The body was discovered by the night custodian.
3. Inexperienced workers are not hired by the company.
4. The bait was taken by the trout.
5. The organization of the quality control department was immediately changed by the new manager.
6. The ball of yarn was unraveled by the kitten.
7. Her heart was broken by him.
8. The entire wedding procession was wiped out by a stack of misdirected bombs from a B-52.
9. The music was provided by a gospel group.
10. The Prince, a forerunner of modern political theory, was written by Machiavelli.

Exercise B:

All of the following sentences are without agents. Revise each of them by adding an appropriate agent and putting the sentence into active form.

Example Sentence: The boat was pulled ashore.

Revision: Three lifeguards pulled the boat ashore.

1. The clock was smashed
2. The usual suspects were rounded up.
3. The problem was quickly solved.
4. The transmitter was destroyed.
5. They were ordered to return.
6. The novel was finished in October
7. A great deal of anxiety was caused.
8. Two hostages had been wounded.