

Active and Passive Voice

Generally speaking, the active voice is more emphatic and direct, the passive voice indirect and wordy, but both serve a purpose. Choosing between passive and active voice is a matter of style, not grammar. Changing a sentence from passive to active might affect the construction of nearby sentences, depending on the information conveyed, your purpose, and your focus.

In some disciplines, such as the sciences and technical fields, the passive voice is preferred because it eliminates mention of the person performing an action—in other words, it is an effective way to avoid writing from the first person “I” perspective. For example, instead of writing, “I observed the cells multiplying in the Petri dish,” lab report writers would use the passive voice to write, “The cells were observed multiplying in the Petri dish.”

Some Grammar

We describe a sentence grammatically as having a “subject” that takes a “verb.” In the active voice, the subject is also a character or agent, something or someone who performs an action.

Active Structure: The woman drives a sports car.

Active Structure: Scientists feverishly study influenza virus mutations.

The subject of a passive structure, however, is not a character performing an action: it is acted upon rather than acting. Some passive structures state the character in a “by phrase” while others don’t. Your word processor typically identifies passive structures containing a “by phrase,” but it often misses passives that don’t contain them.

Passive Structure: The sports car is being driven [by a woman].

Passive Structure: Influenza virus mutations are being studied feverishly [by scientists].

What to Do: Changing Passives to Actives

If you need to change a passive construction to active, use the strategy of a reader and look for the sentence’s character, action, and the action’s goal, in that order. The following technique is adapted from Williams, pp. 53-54:

Passive Structure: Incongruous imagery is used as an expression of the psychological dissociation in Rosa Coldfield’s internal life.

1. Look at the sentence’s grammatical subject. Is it the main character of the sentence—that is, the agent doing the action? Or is it the goal of the action—is it being acted upon? If it is being acted upon, it isn’t the character and the sentence is a passive. You must now look for the sentence’s character.

In the passive structure above, “incongruous imagery” is the grammatical subject, but it’s not the character. It is the goal of Rosa Coldfield’s action, that is, she is using it.

2. Look for the main character of the sentence (sentences containing more than one clause may have more than one character). Characters might be found in a prepositional phrase (look for by or of), appear as an adjective, or be unstated.

“Rosa Coldfield” is the character, but it isn’t the sentence’s grammatical subject. It’s located in a prepositional phrase—“in Rosa Coldfield’s internal life”—and it’s also being used adjectivally to modify “internal life.”

3. Look for actions being performed. They might be present as nouns or adjectives. Then, turn the action(s) into verbs, ask who is performing the action, and make that “who” into a noun functioning as the subject

of the sentence. Rewrite the sentence.

The action being performed is found in noun form, “an expression,” which creates a rather bulky sentence whose meaning is not easily apparent. The verb “is used” is a passive construction that could be made into active voice, if the character performs it.

4. Assemble what you’ve just identified in the character-action-goal order.

Rosa Coldfield + express (or) use(s) + incongruous imagery

5. Write a new sentence. Usually more than one possibility exists; use the one that fits your purpose.

Using incongruous imagery, Rosa Coldfield expresses the psychological dissociation in her internal life.

Rosa Coldfield uses incongruous imagery to express psychological dissociation in her internal life.

Rosa Coldfield experiences dissociation in her internal life, which she expresses in incongruous imagery.

Notice that the re-written sentences are in the active voice and the grammatical subject is identical to the character. In changing from a passive to an active construction, the sentence also changes its focus from an abstraction, “incongruous imagery,” to a person, “Rosa Coldfield.” If your intent is to discuss incongruous imagery, but you want to keep some of the dynamism of the active voice, then you might find a way to slip passive voice into your sentence after all. The following sentence contains two clauses, the first in the active voice, the second in the passive:

Rosa Coldfield experiences dissociation in her internal life, which in turn is expressed in incongruous imagery.

The reader could logically expect the next sentence to focus on how incongruous imagery is employed as a literary device in general, not on how Rosa Coldfield uses it.

References: Finegan, Edward. *Language: Its Structure and Use*. 5th ed. Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2008.
Vande Kopple, William. *Clear and Coherent Prose: A Functional Approach*. Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1989.
Williams, Joseph M. *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. 8th ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2005.