



Active and Passive Voice

OVERVIEW:

For most students, speech and informal writing flows naturally. When it comes to more formal writing; however, students frequently choose passive voice constructions because, to them, the verbs sound more academic or more formal. This mini lesson explores verb choice in a variety of online resources then encourages students to draw conclusions about verb use. They then explore the pieces they are writing, check for active and passive voice, and make necessary revisions.

Objectives:

- Students will identify passive verb use in sentences.
- Students will discuss verbal understanding of why passive verbs are weak.
- Students will correct passive verb use by revising the verbs and using active verb choices.

Featured Materials and Resources:

1. This lesson does require the use of computers in a lab or a portable cart of laptops.
2. Active and Passive Voice: This resource from Purdue's OWL site, provides information about using active and passive voice in your writing, as well as examples of each.
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/539/01/>
3. This lesson also makes use of a handout which is included in the file with this lesson.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE (Background)

Grammar comes naturally as humans acquire language. When it comes time to write a formal paper, a student writer's concern for formal, "proper" language can result in stilted, awkward constructions. As Brock Haussamen et al. explain in

Grammar Alive! A Guide for Teachers, "it is not language itself that is the crucial issue here; it is people, and the match between the language they use and the circumstances they find



themselves in. Language is 'correct' or 'incorrect' depending on the circumstances. For adults as well as children, speaking in formal Edited Written English when you are joking around with your family is as out of place as writing a job application that includes instant messaging abbreviations" (11).

Inviting writers to discover the relationship between the actor (or subject) and the action (or predicate) in passive and active voice can provide students with more details on how the constructions work, better enabling students to choose the best language for their writing situation.

INSTRUCTION & ACTIVITIES

1. If necessary due to computer availability, divide students into groups.
2. Provide the basic definitions of active and passive voice, preferably through demonstration, as shown in "Vignette: Teaching the Passive Voice" (from *Grammar Alive!*).
3. Once students understand the basic concept, share the Active and Passive Voice Web page from the Purdue OWL and explain the basic characteristics of active and passive voice. Alternatively, you can use information from your class grammar text.
4. Explain the class activity: students will explore Websites and note the verbs that are used. After collecting a dozen references to verbs in context, students identify whether the verbs are active or passive voice. Explain that after gathering the information students will work in small groups to draw conclusions about when and how the verbs are used. Suggested Websites include:
 - News sites:
 - CNN
 - NPR
 - MSNBC
 - BBC News
 - Google News sites (a collection of resources)



- Sports sites:
 - ESPN
 - Sports Illustrated
 - The Sporting News
 - Yahoo News: Sports (a collection of resources)
 - Assorted sites:
 - National Geographic
 - Smithsonian Institute
 - Guggenheim Museum
 - Library of Congress
 - National Archives
5. Hand out the verb observation chart included at the bottom of the lesson here, or demonstrate the Interactive Verb Observation Chart, showing students how to add items to the chart as well as how to print and save their work:
- i. On the first screen, type your name and the name of the Website you're examining.
 - ii. Click **Next** to move to the chart screen and enter your information.
 - iii. Enter the details on the site: for the Row label, indicate the title of the page your example came from. In the columns include the subject, the verb, and voice (active or passive).
 - iv. Demonstrate that writing is not limited to the size of the box shown on screen. Answers will scroll.



- v. When you've finished writing your responses, click **Finish** at the top of the screen.
- vi. In the next window, click **Print**. Your answers will be displayed in a Web browser window.
- vii. To print answers, choose the **Print** command from the **File** menu. To save your answers, choose the **Save As...** command from the **File** menu. Students can open the file later in a Web editor or a word processor that imports HTML (such as Microsoft Word or AppleWorks).
- viii. Show students that the instructions for using the tool are available by clicking **Instructions** at the top of the screen.
- ix. Demonstrate how to move between the chart window and the Web page students are analyzing.
- x. Show students how to copy a sentence from the Web page and paste it into the appropriate row and column on the chart.

Once students understand the activity, share the URLs for the Websites you've chosen for the activity. Depending upon the amount of time spent defining the terms and introducing the activity, you may choose to have students explore Websites at home or complete the following steps during the next class session.

Monitor students as they browse the Websites, answering any questions.

Once students have identified twelve verbs from the page(s) they're exploring, divide students into small groups to explore their findings.

Ask students to share their findings and use the collected information to draw conclusions about when writers choose active voice and when they use passive voice.



After you're satisfied that students have had enough time to explore their findings, gather as a group and ask students to share their conclusions. Ask students to support their conclusions with specific details from the sites. Look at the sites as a group if desired.

Once the mini lesson is complete, ask students to explore the pieces that they are writing, checking for active and passive voice. Ask them to revise as necessary, based on whether the verbs are appropriate for the particular sentence. Students may work during their in-class writing time or complete the revisions as homework.

EXTENSIONS

Invite students to search for examples of passive voice in environmental literature (texts they find in their community or see and read every day). You might encourage students to check billboards, newsletters, church bulletins, pamphlets, and brochures that they find in their daily activities. Some texts will rely almost exclusively on active voice, such as instructions for shipping overnight packages in a brochure at the post office. It's likely that students will find some examples of passive voice, however, if they are observant. Passive voice is frequently used in park brochures, for instance (e.g., the rock paintings *were discovered* by settlers in the 1850s; . . . They *were* probably *created* by Native Americans for religious ceremonies). Take advantage of the opportunity to explore why a writer has chosen active over passive voice, and vice versa.

Students can explore a collection of documents that show how style changes over time. Ask students to compare the use of active and passive voice in historical documents (primary and secondary). As they explore the reasons for

the verb choice in documents, you can explore the ways that changing social and cultural attitudes can affect the way that a sentence is written (Are passive sentences more likely to be used to distance a group from responsibility for an action?).

Comparative document study can provide interesting insight on the use of active and passive voice. Numerous online collections can provide a group of documents on the same topic with differing perspectives, including Hot Paper Topics: School Vouchers and School Choice, from St. Ambrose University's O'Keefe Library, Investigative Reporters and Editors'



In the News, and the African American Odyssey from the Library of Congress. Connect the exploration to genre study by considering how the genre combines with the audience and purpose to influence the choices in the document.

STUDENT ASSESSMENT/REFLECTIONS

Monitor student progress during the mini lesson and as students work on their own drafts through anecdotal note-taking and kid-watching.

Ask students to share their revised writing with the class and comment on the details they've added. You might ask students to share "before" and "after" passages to make the revisions more dramatic.

Comment on the changes to student passages by responding in writing or during individual or group conferences.

Further Reading

Hausamen, Brock, et al. 2003. "Discovering Grammar." *Grammar Alive! A Guide for Teachers* Urbana, IL: NCTE.

