

**MIGNON** Grammar Girl here. Today's topic is active voice versus passive voice. Here's Brian from Iowa.

**FOGARTY:**

**BRIAN:** It drives me crazy when people write in passive voice. How can I teach people how to tell the difference between passive and active voice and stay away from passive voice? Thanks!

**MIGNON** A lot of you asked me to explain passive voice and how to avoid it. I'll start with active voice

**FOGARTY:** because it's simpler. In an active sentence, the subject is doing the action. A very straightforward example is the sentence, Steve loves Amy. Steve is the subject, and he's doing the action. He loves Amy, the object.

Another example is the title of the Marvin Gaye song, "I Heard It Through the Grapevine." I is the subject, the one who's doing the action. I is hearing it, the object of the sentence.

In passive voice, the target of the action gets promoted to the subject position. Instead of saying, Steve loves Amy, I would say, Amy is loved by Steve. The subject of the sentence becomes Amy, but she isn't doing anything. Rather, she's just the recipient of Steve's love. The focus of the sentence is changed from Steve to Amy.

If you wanted to make the title of the Marvin Gaye song passive, you would say, it was heard by me through the grapevine-- not such a catchy title anymore. A lot of people think that all sentences that contain a form of the verb to be are in passive voice, but that isn't true. For example, the sentence, I am holding the pen is in active voice, but it uses the verb am, which is a form of to be. The passive form of that sentence is, the pen is being held by me.

Another important point is that passive sentences aren't incorrect. It's just that they often aren't the best way to phrase your thoughts. Sometimes passive voice is awkward, and other times it's vague. When you put sentences in passive voice, it's easy to leave out the agent doing the action. For example, Amy is loved is passive. The problem with that sentence is that you don't know who loves Amy.

In fact, politicians often use passive voice to intentionally obscure the idea of who is taking the action. Ronald Reagan famously said, "Mistakes were made" when referring to the Iran-Contra scandal. Other examples of passive voice for political reasons could include, bombs were dropped and shots were fired. Since I started writing this episode, I've become more aware of

passive voice, and it seems as if I hear politicians use it every day.

So these are some of the reasons to avoid passive voice. The form can lead to awkward sentences and obscured meaning. Also, passive voice is wordy. You can tighten up your writing a lot if you use active voice more often than passive.

On the other hand, Mike from Chicago correctly pointed out that there are instances where passive voice is the best choice. If you don't know who is taking the action, then you can't name that person. Depending on the context, it might make more sense to write the cookies were stolen, instead of somebody stole the cookies. It's a subtle difference. If you want to put the focus on the cookies, use passive voice and put the cookies first. Alternatively, if you want to put the focus on the unknown thief, use active voice.

If you were writing a mystery novel, you might want to highlight the cookies if their specific disappearance were central to the story. So you would choose passive voice and say, the cookies were stolen. So passive voice is often a good choice when the actor isn't known or doesn't matter, or if you want to create some mystery around your sentence.

So remember, in a passive voice sentence, the subject of the sentence is the receiver of the action. Passive voice isn't grammatically incorrect. It's just often not the best choice. If you know who did what, it's better to use an active sentence in most cases.

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