



tipsheet

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Active vs. Passive Voice

Remember your English teacher telling you to use active, not passive, voice in your papers? Your English teacher knows the importance of writing clearly—even in the business world! In general, use active voice constructions in your letters, memos, and reports.

The Reason to Use Active Voice

Active voice is more direct, vivid, and succinct. Passive voice constructions convey an overly formal, impersonal tone and sometimes leave out key information about who did the action; additionally, these types of constructions contribute to weak or wordy sentences.

Some Examples

Please review the following examples to determine the difference in style:

Passive Voice: The proposal *was submitted*.

Active Voice: The five-member team *submitted* the proposal.

Passive Voice: The Florida State player *was dunked* on by Jackie Manuel.

Active Voice: Jackie Manuel *dunked* on the Florida State player.

Passive Voice: The team responded well to the half-time speech *made by* Roy Williams.

Active Voice: The team responded well to Roy Williams' half-time speech.

How to Look For Passive Voice In Your Writing

To begin looking for passive voice constructions, try a quick three-step process. First circle all the forms of the verb "to be" in your message (i.e. "was," "were," "is," "be," "been"). Second, look for a past participle (verbs ending in -ed, -en, -t, or -n) following the "to be" verb forms. Finally, look for a "by someone" or "by something" construction. Keep in mind, however, that sometimes a writer omits the "by someone or something" construction (as in the first example above). If you find a combination of all three steps, you've located a passive voice sentence.

This tip is brought to you by the consultants at the Business Communication Center.

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