The IUP Writing Center
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THE PASSIVE VOICE

EXPLANATION:

In sentences using the active voice, the subject of the sentence does the action. In sentences using the passive voice, the object of the sentence does the action, which weakens the sentence's subject. Active sentences are more emphatic and vigorous, although there are instances in which the passive voice may be preferred.

Consider the following:

Active construction: (Who) (did what) (to whom)
(actor) (performed action) (on recipient)

Passive construction: (Who) (had what done) (by whom)
(recipient) (acted upon) (by actor)

Correcting the passive voice sentence is simple once you recognize the construction. Here's how:

1. Find the verb in the sentence.

2. Ask yourself who or what is performing the action. When you do this, you are identifying the actor in the sentence. Keep in mind that some passive voice sentences omit the real actor. You may not be able to find the person or thing responsible for the action in the sentence; you have to add it.

3. Construct the sentence so the actor performs the action.

EXAMPLES:

PASSIVE: The fly ball was caught by Hernando.
ACTIVE: Hernando caught the fly ball.

PASSIVE: The transformer was struck by lightening, plunging us into darkness.
ACTIVE: Lightening struck the transformer, plunging us into darkness.

PASSIVE: The coolant pumps were destroyed by a surge of power.
ACTIVE: A surge of power destroyed the coolant pumps.

APPROPRIATE USAGE:

The passive voice is appropriate when

(1) the recipient is more important than the actor

(2) the actor is unknown, irrelevant or hard to identify.

EXAMPLES:

1. In certain instances the recipient of the action is more important than the performer of the action:

A priceless Rembrandt painting was stolen from the Metropolitan Museum of Art yesterday by three men posing as museum janitors.

2. When the actor is far less important than the recipient of the action, the passive voice is preferred:

State senator Joe Monday was arrested last night on a charge of drunken driving.

3. When the "who" or "what" is difficult to identify, the passive voice is appropriate:

The cargo was damaged during the transatlantic voyage.