**Active and Passive Voice**

**Pre-Class Activities**

Many people are confused by whether they are using the active or passive voice when writing, and in which scenario each is preferred. Thankfully, there is a simple way of identifying the two styles; the key to understanding the difference between them is to spot the **subject** and the **object** in each sentence, and then selectively order the way you introduce them.

In an active sentence, the **subject** is the element that is doing the action, whereas the object is the element that is receiving the action. In contrast, in a passive sentence, the element targeted by the action is promoted to the subject position. This can sound confusing, but a good way to learn this concept is to realize that a passive sentence will result in the **subject** effectively doing nothing, because whatever is happening is being done to it.

**Some examples**

1A: Consider the following active voice sentence:

***I*** *weighed the fish on weighing scales every week.*

‘***I’*** is the subject here, because ‘I’ did the action (weighing) reported in this sentence, whereas the fish is the object because it is receiving the action (being weighed). It cannot be a passive sentence because the subject is doing something to the object (weighing it).

1P: Now, consider the passive voice version of the previous sentence:

*The* ***fish*** *was weighed by me on weighing scales every week.*

The **fish** is the subject here because it is the focus of the sentence, but you know this cannot possibly be an active sentence because the subject is effectively doing nothing; the ‘me’ is the part of the sentence doing the action (weighing).

2A: Consider the following active voice sentence:

***More than 50,000 students*** *applied to Oxford University last year.*

**‘More than 50,000 students’** is the sentence subject here, because these students were the ones doing the action (applying), whereas ‘Oxford University’ is the object because it is receiving the action (the applications). It cannot be a passive sentence because the subjects are doing something (applying) to the object.

2P: Now, consider the passive voice version of the previous sentence:

***Oxford University*** *was applied to by more than 50,000 students last year.*

**‘Oxford University’** is the subject of the sentence here, but you know the sentence must be passive because the subject is effectively doing nothing; the ‘more than 50,000 students’ are the ones doing the action (applying).

**Why does this matter?**

In the examples listed above, the passive versions are not especially long-winded, yet if you re-examine them you will notice that they feature more words than their respective active versions. This is of great relevance to you as science writers because it is very important that you always try to communicate things as concisely as possible. When you start to write more complex sentences, the difference in word count can be significant when you compare the active and passive versions, and this is important in a setting in which waffly, vague statements are always your enemy.

Along with a lack of conciseness, ambiguity (being vague) is the other unwanted attribute that comes with the use of passive voice sentences. For example, consider the following active and passive versions of a sentence that might appear in the Methods section of your lab report:

3A: **Professor Roberts** kept the mice in their cages for three weeks. **He** then released them into the wild and recaptured them three weeks later.

3P: **The mice** used in this experiment were kept in their cages for three weeks before they were released and then recaptured after they had spent three weeks in the wild.

Note firstly that the active version features 24 words in comparison to the 30 in the passive one, yet, importantly, the active version explains exactly what happened and who did what, whereas the passive one leaves these specific details out.

**Question 1 (6 marks)**

Are the following sentences written in the active or passive voice? Copy and paste the whole set of six sentences and then answer either 'active' or 'passive' for each one.

**Sentence 1:** Difficulty differentiating between active and passive voice is frequently experienced by students at UBC.

**Sentence 2:** The importance of learning these differences is known by writers and presenters.

**Sentence 3:** In general, communicators prefer to use the active voice.

**Sentence 4:** Thoughts are usually expressed more concisely by speakers and writers in this way.

**Sentence 5:** However, in certain situations, it is more advantageous for the passive voice to be used by the author.

**Sentence 6:** Instructors (and these guides) willhighlight some of these examples later in the course.

**Questions 2, 3, 4, 5 (2 marks each, 8 marks total)**

For questions 2 - 5, you need to read each sentence and decide (**1 mark**) whether it is:

1. Written in the active voice, or
2. Written in the passive voice

Once you have decided this, you need to re-write the sentence so it is in the other style of voice (**1 mark**). For example, if the original sentence is written in the passive voice, re-write the sentence in the active voice. *Hint: The goal of this activity is to demonstrate that you are able to distinguish between the active and passive voices when writing. In some cases, you would not want the sentence to be in the other style of voice; however, being able to re-write a sentence from active to passive, or vice versa, is a useful skill to practice.*

**Question 2 (2 marks)**

A new tree frog species was discovered by scientists on a three-week expedition in a South American rainforest.

**Question 3 (2 marks)**

Due to the frog’s chocolate-coloured skin, researchers named it the cocoa frog.

**Question 4 (2 marks)**

In order to climb trees, this frog uses round discs located on its fingers and toes.

**Question 5 (2 marks)**

A total of 60 new species, including 11 fish, one snake, and five other frogs were discovered by the scientists while on their expedition.

**Questions** **6 and 7 (3 marks each, 6 marks total)**

For questions 6 and 7 you need to read each sentence and decide (**1 mark**) whether it is:

1. Written in the active voice
2. Written in the passive voice
3. Written in the active, then passive voice
4. Written in the passive, then active voice

Once you have decided this, re-write the sentence so it is in the other voice (**2 marks**). For example, if the original sentence is written in the passive voice, re-write the sentence in the active voice. *Hint: If you answer either (c) or (d), your re-written sentence* ***will*** *require two changes.*

**Question 6 (3 marks)**

The researchers also tested water quality in the area, while plant and animal species were surveyed by specialists on the team.

**Question 7 (3 marks)**

Worryingly high concentrations of mercury were found in the river system by the researchers, who thought it might have come from illegal mining work in the rainforest.

**Question 8 (2 or 4 marks each, 10 marks total)**

Depending on whether your sentence is written in the active or passive voice, the form of the verb will often be different. Active voice sentences are typically associated with ‘strong verbs’ that explain what the subject is doing to the object in the sentence. The exercise below is designed to make you aware of this other subtle difference between the active and passive voices.

Fill in the blanks in the following sentences with the correct form of the verb attached to each topic:

**A: Topic = evolution, verb = to favour (2 marks)**

**Active:** Natural selection [?????] organisms best adapted to their current environment.

**Passive:** Organisms best adapted to their current environment are [?????] by natural selection.

**B: Topic = recycling, verb = to reduce (2 marks)**

**Active:** We can [?????]landfill waste by recycling cardboard and plastic containers.

**Passive:** Landfill waste can be [?????]by the recycling of cardboard and plastic containers.

**C: Topic = vaccinations, verb = to protect (2 marks)**

**Active:** The bestvaccine is one that [?????] individuals against a disease by stimulating the immune system without causing too much of a reaction.

**Passive:** Individuals can be [?????] against certain diseases by vaccines that stimulate the immune system without causing disease.

**D. Topic = flamingos building nests, verb = to begin; to lay (4 marks)**

**Active:** Up to six weeks before the female flamingo [?????] her eggs, male and female flamingos will [?????] to build nests.

**Passive:** The process of nest building is [?????] by flamingos gathering mud, stones, and small sticks, up to six weeks prior to eggs being [?????].