Active vs. Passive

Make It Active

You should always use active verbs in your copy rather than passive verbs. That means the subject of the sentence should conduct the action of the verb, rather than having the action conducted upon them.

Inexperienced writers often misunderstand the difference between active and passive verbs. This is not a suggestion to write in the present tense. This is not a suggestion to use words associated with movement (run, jump, dance) as opposed to words associated with being sedentary (stand, sit, lie).

This is a recommendation to utilize the following sentence format:

SUBJECT → VERB → DIRECT OBJECT

Examples

I sat in the chair. = ACTIVE
The chair was sat in by me. = PASSIVE

I ran the race. = ACTIVE
The race was run by me. = PASSIVE

John aced his mid-term. = ACTIVE
The mid-term was aced by John. = PASSIVE

Sue walked the dog. = ACTIVE
The dog was walked by Sue. = PASSIVE

The football team won the game. = ACTIVE
The football game was won by the team. = PASSIVE

The city council held a meeting. = ACTIVE
The meeting was held by the city council. = PASSIVE

Officers chased the suspect. = ACTIVE
The suspect was chased by officers. = PASSIVE

Deputies arrested the man. = ACTIVE
The man was arrested. = PASSIVE

Sue applied make-up. = ACTIVE
The make-up was applied. = PASSIVE

Ben punched John. = ACTIVE
John was punched. = PASSIVE

Why It Matters

Active verbs sound better to the ear than passive verbs. It's stronger writing. Strive to have every

verb in your copy be active. If you commit to the idea, alarm bells will ring when you see or hear a passive verb.

Additionally, striving for active verbs will make you a better journalist. It forces you to find out who is conducting the action, whereas passive verbs allow you to hide behind a lack of knowledge.

Examples

The decision on gay marriage <u>was overturned</u>. = PASSIVE AND INCOMPLETE
The U-S Supreme Court <u>overturned</u> the decision on gay marriage. = ACTIVE AND COMPLETE

The journalist <u>was kidnapped</u>. = PASSIVE AND INCOMPLETE
The terror group ISIS <u>kidnapped</u> the journalist. = ACTIVE AND COMPLETE

The touchdown pass <u>was thrown</u> to win the game. = PASSIVE AND INCOMPLETE
Peyton Manning <u>threw</u> the touchdown pass to win the game. = ACTIVE AND COMPLETE