

Campus Academic Resource Program
Grammar Boot Camp: Passive and Active Voice

Workshop Objectives:

- Inform students of the difference between passive and active voice
- Understand the use of prepositions
- Recognize prepositional phrases to avoid passive voice
- Understand concepts of nominalization
- Identify “to be” verbs and the likelihood that the noun form, instead of the verb form, will follow

Passive Voice and Active Voice

Regardless of discipline, professors encourage students to use active voice in academic writing.

When using active voice, the sentence’s subject directly performs the action.

Example:

Active Voice’s subject directly performs the action:

“Carol walked the dog.”

- This sentence shows Carol directly performing the action: her name immediately precedes the sentence’s verb, “walked.”

When using passive voice, the sentence’s subject is acted upon.

Example:

Passive Voice’s subject is acted upon:

“The dog was walked by Carol.”

- This sentence shows Carol acted upon by the sentence’s verb, “was walked by.”

Both sentences convey a similar meaning. However, Carol’s (the sentence’s subject) relationship to the verb is conveyed differently in each sentence. This is one example of how passive voice is used in writing.

Whereas active voice maintains clarity and concision in academic writing, passive voice does not. Passive voice, aside from not maintaining this clarity, also does not portray confidence in one’s writing abilities.

Passive voice can be avoided by: understanding prepositions and prepositional phrases, and understanding nominalization as a method to avoid using “to be” verbs.

Prepositions

Prepositions describe the relationship of: time, location in space, and action or descriptive information between verbs, nouns, or adjectives. The most common prepositions used are: in, out, of, and to. Although prepositions are useful, using too many prepositional phrases can create passive voice in your text. Prepositional phrases create passive voice because these phrases do not maintain

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concision; rather, these phrases make your sentences unavoidably longer. For more in-depth discussion of prepositions, reference CARP's "Prepositions" handout at: carp.sfsu.edu under "Helpful Handouts."

- A prepositional phrase is a phrase comprised of a *preposition* and its **object**. The phrase itself operates as an adjective or an adverb. The examples below demonstrate how prepositional phrases function as adjectives. The *prepositions* are italicized and the **objects** are bolded.
 - Adjective: You can tell which clothes she wears most often: the jacket *with* **several holes**, the shoes *with* **missing laces**, and the jeans *without* **pockets**.
 - The entire prepositional phrases are italicized and operate as adjectives to describe the preceding nouns.
 - The first prepositional phrase, "with several holes" describes its preceding noun, "jacket."
 - The second prepositional phrase, "with missing laces" describes its preceding noun, "shoes."
 - The third prepositional phrase, "without pockets" describes its preceding noun, "jeans."
 - Adverb: Strolling *along* **the lake**, he felt peaceful even though he had a lot on his mind.
 - The entire prepositional phrase is italicized and operates as an adverb to describe the preceding verb, "strolling."
- Now that we understand both the definition of and how to identify prepositional phrases, we can move on to recognize how they can create passive voice.

Prepositional Phrases as a Form of Passive Voice

Although prepositional phrases can be useful, using too many in one paper creates passive voice. Prepositional phrases create passive voice because they inherently "talk around"¹ the sentence's subject, consequently avoiding directness and concision.

The following examples will show a sentence with too many prepositional phrases and how to edit these sentences to avoid using these phrases.

- They analyzed the methods of communication for the company in the document.
 - The above example uses three *prepositional phrases*.
 - *Methods of communication*
 - *For the company*
 - *In the document*
 - Instead, the sentence can be restructured to eliminate the prepositional phrases.

¹ "Talking around" a subject means that the prepositional phrases create unnecessary strings of adjectives or adverbs. One way to avoid this is to make these phrases possessive qualities of the subject and avoid using prepositions altogether.

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- The document analyzed the company's communication methods.
 - The edited example does not use prepositional phrases and therefore avoids passive voice.
 - Also, "The document," or the sentence's subject, is performing the action rather than being acted upon.

Exercise 1: Prepositional Phrases

Eliminate the sentence's prepositional phrases to create active voice.

- Example: Upon further analysis, we determined that the candidate could have won more votes by emphasizing the need for education reform in the name of our nation's future.

○ _____

Nominalization

Nominalization refers to constructing a verb or adjective into a noun. These nominalizations usually follow conjugations of "to be" verbs. Grouped together, "to be" verbs and nominalizations create passive voice.

"To be" verbs are conjugations of the infinitive form of the verb, "to be." Some common conjugations are: is, was, are, been, and being.

- For example:
 - The film was a unique representation of the novel.
 - In this case, the "to be" verb is "was."
 - Following that verb is the noun "representation," changed from the verb "represent."
 - This sentence is in passive voice because the grouping of the "to be" verb and the nominalization ("representation") avoid concision and clarity.
- One way to edit this sentence is to eliminate the "to be" verb and change the noun back to its verb form.
 - The film uniquely represented the novel.
 - The meaning of this sentence is the same as the first example, but uses active voice through its concision and clarity.
 - The subject, "the film", directly performs the action of representing instead of being described as a representation. Altering the noun form of words to their verb forms aids in maintaining active voice.

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Exercise 2: Nominalization and “To Be” Verbs

Identify the “to be” verbs in the following sentences and the word in noun form that should be changed to its verb form. Then, use your new verb instead of the “to be” verb to rewrite the sentence in active voice.

- Her paintings are a derivation of Warhol’s.
To Be Verb: _____ Noun: _____

- Joe’s abstract was a poor generalization of Sarah’s work.
To Be Verb: _____ Noun: _____

- Historically speaking, those advertisements were an indication of socialist alliance.
To Be Verb: _____ Noun: _____

Exercise 3: Review

Read through the following sentences and determine what makes the sentence passive: is it using too many prepositional phrases, using “to be” verbs, or both? Then, edit the sentence using the strategies discussed.

1. Her thesis, while thoroughly researched, did not efficiently analyze the implications of the country’s war on their media for the youth. PP TB BOTH

2. Our professor demonstrated some of the ways and methods for editing sentences in our essays despite my good academic standing. PP TB BOTH

3. Lenore’s paper was an analysis of the impact of globalization on exporting in the United States. PP TB BOTH

4. That weekly report was an obvious lack of effort on the whole team’s part. PP TB BOTH

5. The students’ papers emphasized the need for tutoring during their undergrad to work toward better writing skills. PP TB BOTH

6. The results of the student election were a disappointment; they left Troy feeling a loss of hope in the system. PP TB BOTH

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7. Living in the dorms was a portrayal of my dramatic youthful life. PP TB BOTH

8. He knows his outline was not a reflection of his best work. PP TB BOTH

9. The rooster was caught by the farmer outside the pen. PP TB BOTH

10. Sam's essay analyzes the impact of the Internet on the business world within the last five years. PP TB BOTH



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Answer Keys (Exercises 1, 2, and 3)

Exercise 1: Prepositional Phrases

First, let's identify the prepositions so we can identify the prepositional phrases. The prepositions are bolded in the italicized prepositional phrase.

- *Upon further analysis*, we determined that the candidate could have won more votes *by emphasizing* the need *for education reform in the name of* our nation's future.
 - Consider what each phrase does for the sentence.
 - Does it immediately direct your reader to the main point?
 - How do the phrases portray the sentence's subject?
 - Do the phrases make the sentence "talk around" the main point?
 - One example of how to rewrite the sentence could be:
 - The candidate could have won more votes had he emphasized education reform.
 - This sentence conveys the same meaning as the above example. However, eliminating the prepositional phrases makes its meaning more direct and puts the sentence's subject at the center.

Exercise 2: Nominalization and "To Be" Verbs

- Her paintings are a derivation of Warhol's.
 - The "to be" verb in this sentence is "are." Consequently, the word "derivation" is a noun, indicated by the preceding article, "a."
 - We can change the noun form to its proper verb form once we recognize what that verb form is.
 - "Derivation" is a noun; "To derive" is the infinitive verb form.
 - The edited sentence would be: Her paintings derive from Warhol's.
 - Even though this edited sentence uses a prepositional phrase, it does not change the sentence's context. Moreover, it doesn't make the sentence "circle" around the subject.
- Joe's abstract was a poor generalization of Sarah's work.
 - The "to be" verb in this sentence is "was." The word "generalization" is a noun and the word "poor" is an adjective. Like the previous example, this noun is also indicated by the preceding article, "a."
 - "Generalization" is a noun; "To generalize" is the infinitive verb form.
 - Since the adjective "poor" describes the noun, we can change it to an adverb to describe the verb.
 - The edited sentence would be: Joe's abstract poorly generalizes Sarah's work.
- Historically speaking, those advertisements were an indication of socialist alliance.
 - The "to be" verb in this sentence is "were." Again indicated by the article "an," the noun is "indication."

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- “Indication” is a noun; “To indicate” is the infinitive verb form.
- The edited sentence would be: Historically speaking, those advertisements indicated socialist alliance.

Exercise 3: Review

1. Her thesis, while thoroughly researched, did not efficiently analyze the implications of the country’s war on their media for the youth. **PP**

Let’s look at the prepositional phrases in this sentence:

of the country’s war

on their media

for the youth

Like the previous examples, we can eliminate the prepositional phrases by asking ourselves what they do for the sentence. Moreover, we can also make these prepositional phrases possessive qualities of the subject. An edited sentence could look something like this:

While thoroughly researched, her thesis did not efficiently analyze the country’s war’s implications on youth media.

2. Our professor demonstrated some of the ways and methods for editing sentences in our essays despite my good academic standing. **PP**

Let’s look at the prepositional phrases in this sentence:

of the ways and methods

for editing sentences

in our essays

despite my good academic standing

Like the previous examples, we can eliminate the prepositional phrases by asking ourselves what they do for the sentence. Moreover, we can also make these prepositional phrases possessive qualities of the subject. An edited sentence could look something like this:

Although I’m in good academic standing, our professor demonstrated some methods to edit our essays’ sentences.

3. Lenore’s paper was an analysis of the impact of globalization on exporting in the United States. **BOTH**

This sentence contains both too many prepositional phrases and “to be” verbs. Let’s identify each component. The “to be” verb is “was” and the noun form is “analysis.” The prepositional phrases in this sentence are:

of the impact

of globalization

on exporting

in the United States

Firstly, we eliminate the “to be” verb and instead make the noun form a verb. Then we eliminate the extra prepositional phrases by making them possessive qualities. An edited

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sentence could look something like this:

Lenore's paper analyzed globalization's impact on the United States' exportation system.

4. That weekly report was an obvious lack of effort on the whole team's part. **BOTH**
This sentence contains both too many prepositional phrases and "to be" verbs. Let's identify each component. The "to be" verb is "was" and the noun form is "lack." The prepositional phrases in this sentence are:

of effort

on the whole team's part

Firstly, we eliminate the "to be" verb and instead make the noun form a verb. Then we eliminate the extra prepositional phrases by making them possessive qualities. An edited sentence could look something like this:

That weekly report lacked effort from the whole team.

5. The students' papers emphasized the need for tutoring during their undergrad to work toward better writing skills. **PP**

Let's look at the prepositional phrases in this sentence:

for tutoring

during their undergrad

toward better writing skills

Like the previous examples, we can eliminate the prepositional phrases by asking ourselves what they do for the sentence. We don't necessarily always have to make extraneous prepositional phrases possessive qualities. Instead, we can restructure the sentence entirely. An edited sentence could look something like this:

As seen in the students' papers, tutoring would aid their education and help develop better writing skills.

6. The results of the student election were a disappointment; they left Troy feeling a loss of hope in the system. **TB**
This sentence uses the "to be" verb "were" and makes the word "disappointment" a noun instead of a verb. One way to edit this sentence is to conjugate the verb "to disappoint" to fit the past tense context of the sentence. An edited sentence could look something like this:
The results of the student election disappointed Troy; he felt a loss of hope in the system.

7. Living in the dorms was a portrayal of my dramatic youthful life. **TB**
This sentence uses the "to be" verb "was" and makes the word "portrayal" a noun instead of a verb. One way to edit this sentence is to conjugate the verb "to portray" to fit the past tense context of the sentence. An edited sentence could look something like this:

Living in the dorms portrayed my life as a dramatic youth.

Or, if you want to change the sentence's tense:

Life in the dorms portrays youth's dramatic lives.

8. He knows his outline was not a reflection of his best work. **TB**
This sentence uses the "to be" verb "was" and makes the word "reflection" a noun instead of a verb. One way to edit this sentence is to conjugate the verb "to reflect" to fit the past tense context of the sentence. An edited sentence could look something like this:

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He knows his outline didn't reflect his best work.

Or, if you want to change the sentence's tense:

He knows his outline doesn't reflect his best work.

9. The rooster was caught by the farmer outside the pen. **TB**
This sentence uses the “to be” verb “was” but doesn't make the word “caught” a noun. It still uses passive voice because the subject, “the farmer” is acted upon instead of doing the acting. An edited sentence could look something like this:
The farmer caught the rooster outside the pen.

10. Sam's essay analyzes the impact of the Internet on the business world within the last five years. **PP**

Let's look at the prepositional phrases in the sentence:

of the Internet

on the business world

within the last five years

Like the previous examples, we can ask ourselves what the prepositional phrases are doing for our sentence. One way to edit this sentence is to make the phrases possessive qualities of the subject, “the essay.” An edited sentence could look something like this:

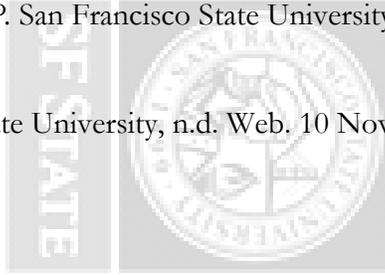
Sam's essay analyzes the last five years' Internet impact on business.

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Works Cited

“Active Voice and Passive Voice.” *CARP*. San Francisco State University, n.d. Web. 10 November 2015

“Prepositions.” *CARP*. San Francisco State University, n.d. Web. 10 November 2015.



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