

Fixing Verbs in the Passive Voice

Verbs are considered passive when they use a form of the verb 'to be' plus the simple past tense of an active verb. The *action* of the verb is expressed after the verb itself; that is, it is distanced from the 'subject' of the sentence, the person or thing that enacts the verb. The 'object' of the sentence, the person or thing the verb is being *done to*, is in the subject position in the sentence.

Here are some **examples** of sentences which use verbs in the passive voice:

The TV was turned off.

The building was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

The dog was walked by Sarah.

Blood is pumped throughout the body, delivering oxygen.


Here is how a writer could **strengthen the sentences above**:

Stanley turned off the TV.

Frank Lloyd Wright designed the building.

Sarah walked the dog.

The heart pumps blood throughout the body, delivering oxygen.

 Some sentences will be written in the passive voice, for example, if the 'subject' is anonymous or general or if rewriting the sentence in the active voice would include irrelevant information (the beginning of this sentence is written in passive voice).

As a general rule, avoid the passive voice when the "who" completing the action is specific. Configure the sentence so that the subject is the primary focus and the verb is in the active voice; this will strengthen the sentence.

Replacing 'to be' Verbs with Active Verbs to Strengthen Your Writing

The forms of the 'to be' verbs include *am, is, are, was, were, have/has been* and *being*. Watch out for these verbs in your writing when you are editing. Employ them when truly necessary to describe a state of existence, but when you can rewrite a sentence with an active verb, *do* it! Using active verbs strengthens your diction (word choice) and makes your writing more specific and vivid. Revising sentences to improve on a 'to be' verb also helps you avoid wordiness and empty phrasing.

Example: The fact of the matter is that most community college students are persistent despite the many demands in their lives. Successful students are the kind of people who seem to juggle work, family and other commitments with school.

Revision: Most community college students persist, despite the many demands in their lives. Successful students juggle work, family and other commitments with school.