Active vs. Passive Voice

Active voice means that the verb directs action toward an object. On the other hand, passive voice means that the verb directs the action toward the subject. In general, use active verbs whenever possible. They emphasize the subject. They clarify ambiguity (who did what). They give life to your sentences. And they usually shorten sentences.

1. A verb is active when it expresses an action performed by its subject.

   Active: Dr. Humberd prepared the budget.
   Passive: The budget was prepared by Dr. Humberd.

2. Active verbs can help clarify ambiguity.

   Original: The bins must be emptied at the end of the day. (By whom?)
   Better: The janitor must empty the bins at the end of the day.

   Original: The painting was reported stolen over the weekend by the museum curator.
   Better: The museum curator reported that the painting was stolen over the weekend.

   Note that the curator apparently does not know who stole the painting.

3. Active verbs can help simplify and give life to your sentences.

   Original: It has been decided by Extension administrators that tenure should be granted to you for your outstanding performance. (18 words)
   Better: Extension administrators have decided to grant you tenure for your outstanding performance. (12 words)

   Note that using active voice often can shorten your sentences as well.

4. Passive voice is appropriate in some cases, such as the second example in #2 above, when the doer of the action is not important, not known, or deliberately not mentioned. Passive voice also is useful when you want to emphasize the receiver of the action, rather than the doer.

   Example: However, the movie was chosen without thought of its R-rating. (This places the emphasis on how the movie was chosen rather than who made the decision.)

   Example: The president was bitten by a squirrel. (Presumably, the president is more important than the squirrel.)

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