

## How to eliminate the passive voice from your writing . . .

*What is the passive voice?*

The passive voice occurs when the object of an action becomes the subject of a sentence, as in:

The book was read by me.

The book was written in 1819.

*What's wrong with writing in the passive voice?*

It is not grammatically incorrect or even always inappropriate to use the passive voice. Lawyers use it all the time in order to avoid placing blame (“The defendant’s car was demolished.”) Historians, however, want to know who’s responsible for any given action or event. Many historians argue that lazy writers use the passive voice in order to avoid finding out important information. For example, if we say, “Dynamite was used in the 1880s,” we don’t have to worry about looking up who used the dynamite or why they did so. As a result, we really aren’t saying much at all. And if we say “Dynamite was used by anarchists in the 1880s,” that’s just awkward. Good sentences begin with the actor: “Anarchists used dynamite in the 1880s.”

*How do I eliminate the passive voice?*

Easy. Find an actor or group of actors, and begin the sentence there. Then describe the action and its object.

*Practice:*

Change the following sentences from passive voice to active voice.

Emmitt Till was lynched in 1955.

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It is believed that the FBI intentionally murdered Black Panther Fred Hampton.

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The Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act was passed in 1996.

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*Sources and resources:*

[unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/passivevoice.html](http://unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/passivevoice.html)

William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*