What is active and passive voice?

**Active Voice:** In an active voice sentence, the subject of the sentence performs the action and the object of the sentence receives the action. Active sentences follow the pattern: subject-verb-object.

*Example:* The dog chews a shoe.
(subject)  (verb)    (object)
Joyce spilled the beans.
(subject)  (verb)    (object)

**Passive Voice:** A passive voice sentence switches the sentence structure around, and the subject becomes a passive recipient of the action. Passive sentences usually follow the pattern: object-verb-subject.

*Example:* The shoe was chewed on by the dog.
(object)  (*to be* verb)    (verb)    (subject)
The beans were spilled by Joyce.
(object)  (*to be* verb)    (verb)    (subject)

In the above example, the passive form of the sentence is wordy and it includes a double verb — a “to be” verb (was) is followed by another verb (chewed). In a passive sentence, the second verb is usually a form that ends in “ed”, “en”, or “t”.

Why should I avoid writing in the passive voice?

The passive voice is not grammatically incorrect; it is simply a less effective style of writing because it weakens the clarity. In addition, passive voice may feel slow-moving and impersonal to the reader. The active voice strengthens your writing, sounds better, and gets your point across more clearly.

Nevertheless, there are times when you may want to use the passive voice to emphasize the action in a sentence or to emphasize the recipient of an action. For example, the following sentence puts Jennifer front-and-center, emphasizing her accomplishment: Jennifer was given a prestigious award. Passive voice may be used when someone wants to be vague about who is responsible for something that has happened: Sixteen people were killed in the train accident.

Checking for Passive Voice:

- Read through your paper and circle every “to be” verb: am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been. Now check each “to be” verb to see if it is followed by a past participle (a verb ending in -ed, -en, or -t). If so, the sentence is in passive voice.
- Is the one performing the action at the beginning of the sentence? If not, you probably have a passive sentence. Fix it by moving the one performing the action to the beginning of the sentence.
- Do you have any sentences ending in “by the __________”? For example: The piece was played on the violin by the virtuoso. This is a clue that the sentence may be passive.