

Module: Language

Lesson Title: Passive or Active Voice – Which is Best?

Objectives and Standards

Students will:

- Recognize the difference between active and passive voice in writing samples
- Be able to convert sentences in passive voice to active voice
- Write paragraphs based on a real-life workplace scenario in active voice
- Be able to edit and revise their writing to ensure it is in the appropriate voice for the situation given

Florida Adult Basic Education Reading Standards	Level Expectation
Demonstrate command of conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking. (CCR.LA.ABE.1)	NRS Level 4 – Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Materials

- Handout A: Passive and Active Voice Matching Game
- Handout B: Writing in the Workplace
- YouTube video – Active and Passive Voice. University of British Columbia Science Writing. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FHPQpgkNjb0>
- YouTube video – Active and Passive Voice. Gotham Writer’s Workshop. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOhUmttk90>

Instructional Plan

Overview

Writing in the workplace is usually quick and to the point: when, where, and how much. In the workplace, you have to assume that whoever is going to read what you have written has very little time and wants to get to the point quickly. Unfortunately, many adult education students tend to write in a much more convoluted manner using the passive rather than active voice. This lesson provides students with an understanding of the difference between the active and passive voice when writing and when it is appropriate to use each.

Process

Prior to the lesson, you may wish to download the YouTube video clips. View each clip and see which you feel will be most beneficial to your students and the level at which they are working. The Gotham Writers’ Workshop clip includes an advertisement before the instruction begins. The University of British Columbia’s video is longer, but is especially useful for students who are learning how to approach writing in science.

In addition, prior to the class, you will need to set up the Active and Passive Voice Matching Game for students using **Handout A**. The game requires that students move each of the sentences into its appropriate

category – Active or Passive. Print enough copies of the game for groups of 3-4 students. You may wish to print on heavier stock paper for longevity. Cut the pieces of the game into strips and place them in envelopes.

Begin the lesson by writing the words **Active** and **Passive** on the board. Ask students to define these two terms in their own words. At this point, you are looking for an answer that conveys the meaning of the two terms, but not necessarily as associated with types of writing. Write the students definition on the board.

Explain that when a person writes, he or she uses either an active voice or passive voice. Use the following definitions and examples to help students see the differences between the two voices.

Active Voice	Passive Voice
In the active voice, the subject performs the action expressed by the verb.	In the passive voice, the subject receives the action expressed in the verb.
<p style="text-align: center;">Someone changed the clock. <i>(Subject) (verb) (object)</i> <i>Subject is actively doing something.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">The clock was changed. <i>(subject) (verb)</i> <i>Something was done to the subject.</i></p>

Have students brainstorm some sentences that are in the passive voice. Write the sample sentences on the board for use later in the lesson.

Use the following information to discuss the importance of using the appropriate voice when writing. Emphasize the following:

Active Voice

- Is more direct
- Includes concrete verbs
- Clearly states the action being performed by the subject
- Has simple, easily understood subject-verb format
- Usually is more concise because fewer words are needed to express action
- Often indicates a more thorough understanding of the material about which you are writing

Passive Voice

- Is less direct
- Includes weaker “to be” verbs (is, am, was, were, being, been)
- Tends to create longer more convoluted sentences that are harder to understand
- Shows the action being performed on the subject
- Leaves reader unsure about who or what is performing the action
- Can be seen as “sloppy” or “lazy thinking” by those who may not understand the material about which they are writing

The passive voice is often used in situations where someone prefers not to take responsibility for something. For example: If you needed to fire someone for not showing up for work on time, you would probably say or write the following, “*The decision has been made to let you go*” rather than “*I have decided to fire you.*” In the past, the scientists have used the passive voice when writing research findings because it lends a sense of objectivity and takes the focus away from the scientist who performed the experiments. However, today

more scientists use the active voice when writing their findings. It is also common for news stories to include sentences in the passive voice, such as “the store was robbed” or “the bombs were dropped” to obscure or indicate an unknown person who took the action. Listen to a news broadcast and see how many times a reporter uses the passive versus active voice.

Model the strategy for changing sentences from passive to active voice by using the following step-by-step process:

- Write the following sentence on the board. *The rule for awarding extra points was changed.*
- Identify the subject of the sentence and underline it.
- Identify the verb of the sentence and circle it.
- Ask students if the “rule” did the changing. Students should respond “no,” someone changed the rule, but they don’t know who did it.
- Have students change the verb by removing the “to be” form and the past tense. In this example, “was changed” must be modified to “change.”
- Now rewrite the sentence in active form. *The teacher changed the rule for awarding extra points.*

Continue guided practice using the passive voice sentences that students created earlier in the lesson. Have students work together as a whole class or in small groups to rewrite the sentences using active voice. Have students share their sentences with the rest of the class.

As a final activity, provide students with **Handout B: Writing in the Workplace**. Have students select a scenario and write an email or notice to employees regarding the situation included in the scenario. Remind students to write using the active voice.

Debrief by having students share their writing samples. Discuss any issues or concerns they have in writing text in an active voice.

Sample Debriefing Questions

- What did you find most challenging about changing the voice of a sentence?
- After practicing, did you find it easier to write in an active voice? Why?
- How can you use this activity to revise and edit your own writing?

Modifications for Different Levels

This strategy for converting text from passive to active voice works with all level students, except those at the Beginning Literacy Level. For lower level students use very simple passive sentences such as the following:

- The ball was thrown.
- The cake was eaten.
- Too much noise is being made.

Have students at this level use the same strategy as outlined above to change to the active voice.

- Find the subject
- Find the verb
- Remove the “to be” or past tense of the verb
- Rewrite the sentence

In the active voice the sentences would read:

- Lucy threw the ball.
- The dog ate the cake.
- The group made too much noise.

At a more complex level, provide an article from the newspaper that is written in the passive voice. Have students rewrite the article by changing from passive to active voice. Have students watch a news report and identify every time a broadcaster uses the passive voice. Have students rewrite what the broadcaster said using the active voice. Share the results with the rest of the class.

Assessments/Extensions

Assess students' ability to recognize sentences that are in active and passive voice by using the game you developed from **Handout A: Active and Passive Voice Matching Game**. Set up the game as a competition. Explain that their task is to categorize all sentences correctly as either active or passive. Have students debrief the activity by explaining how they determine which sentences were active and which were passive. If possible, award a small prize to the winning group.

Handout A: Passive and Active Voice Matching Game

Passive	Active
The instructions have been changed.	Someone changed the instruction.
She will have to be taught how to operate the new assembly robot.	Someone will teach her how to operate the new assembly robot.
This car was manufactured in Japan by Toyota.	Toyota manufactured this car in Japan.
Last year, 2,000 new units had been produced by the time we introduced the new design.	We produced 2,000 new units by the time we introduced the new design last year.
Casual clothes must not be worn by staff on meeting days.	You must not wear casual clothes on staff meeting days.
Employees are required to wear the company uniform when on the job.	The company requires employees to wear uniforms when on the job.
The rumor about lay-offs must have been started by our competitor.	Our competitors started this rumor about lay-offs.
We were told to wait here for the next tour.	The guide told us to wait here for the next tour.
The word-processing test will be given at 5:00 p.m. by the human resources department.	The human resources department will give the word processing test at 5:00 p.m. this afternoon.
The design work must be completed by end of business tomorrow.	You must complete the design work by end of business tomorrow.

Handout B: Writing in the Workplace

Scenario	Directions
<p>Scenario 1</p> <p>You were promoted to shift supervisor at a retail store six weeks ago. You supervise 12 part-time and three full-time employees. The full-time employees report for work at 1:00 p.m. The part-time employees report for work at 5:30 p.m. You noticed that over the past two weeks, five part-time employees have been 10-15 minutes late getting to work or have taken extended breaks during the busy 6:30 – 8:00 timeframe.</p>	<p>Write an email that addresses the policy regarding time and attendance. Use the active voice to make sure that everyone is clear on his/her responsibilities.</p>
<p>Scenario 2</p> <p>You are a long-time employee in the housekeeping department of a large hotel. You receive excellent evaluation and performance reports. You follow the rules understand the importance of meeting the supervisor’s expectations. You recently noticed that newer employees are cutting concerns and not following safety procedures with cleaning chemicals, especially bleach and ammonia.</p>	<p>Write an email to your supervisor outlining your concerns regarding this issue. Include possible actions that could be taken to stop the problem. Use the active voice to ensure that your supervisor has a clear understanding of the issues.</p>
<p>Scenario 3</p> <p>You are the manager of a small textile plant. You just returned from vacation and everyone in the office is upset about rumors of possible lay-offs and outsourcing of jobs to a foreign country. You know the rumors are false.</p>	<p>Write a notice to the employees that will stop the rumors once and for all. Use the active voice to ensure that all employees understand that the rumors are just rumors and there is no truth to support them.</p>