



Advanced Writing Skills – Syllabus

Course Description: After studying grammar and mechanics, the student now has an understanding of the eight parts of speech, grammatical sentence structure, and punctuation rules; however there are still many writing skills to cover. Students in this class will learn about active vs. passive voice, logical sentence construction, faulty comparisons, mixed constructions, parallelism, misplaced and dangling modifiers, effective use of language, and concise writing.

Course Outline:

Week One: Active vs. Passive Voice

Week Two: Logical Constructions

A. Basic Rules

B. Errors of Shift

Week Three: Pronoun Agreement & Reference

Week Four: Faulty Comparisons

Week Five: Structure Errors

A. Mixed Constructions

B. Parallel Structure

Week Six: Misplaced & Dangling Modifiers

Week Seven: Improving Writing Voice

A. Effective Use of Language

B. Concise Writing

Week Eight: Final Review



Advanced Writing Skills – Grading Outline

Advanced Writing Skills will be graded based on the number of answers in each assignment. Because most of the assignments are technical, they will be graded similar to a test or quiz. For example, if the student must change ten verb tenses in an assignment and misses two, the student would receive an 80% on that assignment.

As there are numerous assignments in each lesson, the total number of required answers per lesson will be added up. Any incorrect answers will be subtracted from the score, and the grade will be given accordingly. For example, if there are 50 answers in a lesson, and a student misses 4, the grade is as follows:

$$50 - 4 = 46 \text{ points}$$

$$46/50 = 92\%$$

Course Components	Percentage of Final Grade
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Weekly Assignments	70%
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Final Test	30%
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EXAMPLE

assignment grades: 70, 80, 90, 75, 87, 92, 94, 86 = 84%

average test grade: 94 %

$$.84 \times 70 = 58.8$$

$$.94 \times 30 = 28.2$$

FINAL GRADE: 87%



Advanced Writing Skills

Lesson One: Active vs. Passive Voice

SAMPLE LESSON

Even once you have mastered the parts of speech, proper sentence structure, and the majority of grammar rules, there are still some other essential writing skills to cover. These writing skills will enable you to present the best writing voice possible.

With a working understanding of sentence structure and verb tenses, we will first learn about two different “voices” in which to write sentences. These voices are known as *active voice* and *passive voice* and **pertain to the way the subject and verb are written.**

ACTIVE VOICE –

Active voice is the one you should and will use most often. Active voice makes the meaning of your sentences more clear for your readers and keeps your sentences from becoming too wordy or complicated. Active voice is the most direct.

In a sentence using active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action expressed by the verb.

- The dog bit the boy.
- The students are conducting the experiment.
- The librarian will check out the books.

- (The dog is the one who did the biting.)
- (The students are the ones who are conducting the experiment.)
- (The librarian will be the one who will check out the books.)

PASSIVE VOICE –

On the other hand, **in a sentence using passive voice, the subject of the sentence receives the action expressed by the verb.**

- The boy was bitten by the dog.
- The experiment is being conducted by the students.
- The books will be checked out by the librarian.

- (The boy did not bite anyone. He was bitten.)
- (The experiment is not conducting anything. It is being conducted.)
- (The books will not check out anything. They will be checked out.)

Notice immediately that the passive voice sentences are longer. Of course, a long sentence is not a problem; but when you could express the same meaning in a more clear and direct manner (using active voice), you should. The passive voice is acceptable occasionally (more on this at the end of the lesson), but its overuse lends to cloudy, clunky writing.

IDENTIFYING PASSIVE VOICE SENTENCES –

There are four ways to identify passive voice sentences.

1. First, look for a helping verb. All passive voice sentences will use some form of the helping verb *to be* (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been).
2. Second, look at the action verb. All passive voice sentences use an action verb in the past tense, along with the helping verb.
3. Third, look for a prepositional phrase. Many passive voice sentences contain a phrase beginning with 'by.'
4. Finally, remember to look at the subject – is the subject *doing* the action of the sentence, or is the action being done *to the subject*?

Of course, many active voice sentences also use *to be* verbs as well as past tense verbs or prepositional phrases beginning with 'by.' However, when you see these two or three elements working together, and take a close look at the subject, you can more easily identify passive voice sentences.

Study the examples below. We have put the helping verb in bold, underlined the past tense verb, and italicized the prepositional phrase.

- Research will **be** presented *by Mr. Andrews* at the conference.
- The exam **was** failed *by one third* of the students.
- The brakes **were** slammed as the car sped downhill.

- (The research will not present anything. The research will be presented *by* Mr. Andrews.)
- (The exam did not fail anything. It was failed *by* the students.)
- (The third sentence does not contain a prepositional phrase; however, we still understand that the brakes did not slam themselves; they were slammed *by* the driver of the vehicle.)

Assignment 1A: Write whether the following sentences are constructed using active or passive voice.

1. The balloons were inflated before the party.
2. Dad made pizza for dinner.
3. The instructions were read slowly.
4. Our reservation was canceled because of several problems.
5. The children cleaned up their mess.
6. Several ideas were discussed.
7. Coffee had been spilled all over the counter.
8. Our new refrigerator will be installed tomorrow.
9. Shelby folded the mat and put it away.
10. We baked bread for dinner.
11. The windshield was shattered by the rock.
12. I received a letter in the mail.
13. The boxes are being stored in the attic.
14. The mailman arrived earlier than usual today.
15. We carried the backpacks to the car.

Assignment 1B: Please read the directions for this assignment very carefully, as many students complete this assignment incorrectly. (If you do not have clear understanding or remembrance of present, past, and future verb tenses, please study the additionally attached document for review.)

Determine the **voice** and **tense** of each sentence below, using one of the six choices provided. **DO NOT write a sentence using each voice and tense.**

Voice/Tense Choices:

- a. Active/Present
- b. Passive/Present
- c. Active/Past
- d. Passive/Past
- e. Active/Future
- f. Passive/Future

EXAMPLE: “Allison drank a cup of coffee.” This is c – Active/Past (the voice of the sentence is active, and the verb is past tense.)

AGAIN – do not write your own sentences! This is simply an example sentence. Study the ten sentences below and determine the voice and tense of each. Ask yourself, “Is Sentence 1 Choice a, b, c, d, e, or f?” etc.

1. Spencer will travel to Denver. **(i.e. - is this sentence Choice a, b, c, d, e, or f?)**
2. The game is played by the children.
3. The baby was awakened by her brother.
4. We sold the house quickly.
5. You wore a yellow dress to the event.
6. The garage will be cleaned on Saturday.
7. Your ideas were organized.
8. You are making dinner for us.
9. Several packages were delivered.
10. The fish will be fed every afternoon.

REWRITING PASSIVE VOICE SENTENCES –

Although many students can identify passive voice sentences, most students have a more difficult time rewriting passive voice sentences into active voice sentences. Follow these steps for rewriting passive voice sentences:

1. Identify the performer of the action. This performer should become the subject of your new sentence.
2. Identify the verb tense. Make sure your verb tense in the new sentence is the same. (i.e. - if the passive voice sentence uses simple future tense, your rewritten active voice sentence should also use the simple future tense.)

Let's study two examples, using the passive voice sentences from earlier in the lesson.

EXAMPLE 1:

- **Passive Voice Sentence:** “Research will **be presented** *by Mr. Andrews* at the conference.”
 1. Who is performing the action? Mr. Andrews is the performer of the action, so he will become the subject of our active voice sentence.
 2. What is the verb tense? The verb is written in simple future tense, so we must retain the simple future tense in our active voice sentence.
- **Active Voice Sentence:** “Mr. Andrews will present the research at the conference.”

EXAMPLE 2:

- **Passive Voice Sentence:** “The exam **was failed** *by one third* of the students.”
 1. Who is performing the action? “One third of the students” is the performer of the action, so this will become the subject of our active voice sentence.
 2. What is the verb tense? The verb is written in simple past tense, so we must retain the simple past tense in our active voice sentence.
- **Active Voice Sentence:** “One third of the students failed the exam.”

IMPORTANT NOTE –

- Remember that the distinction between active and passive voice has to do with the way the subject and verb are written (i.e. is the subject *performing* the action or is the action being done *to* the subject?). It has nothing to do with whether the subject of the sentence *seems* active or passive, or whether the main verb is an action or linking verb. It also has nothing to do with the verb tense. Use the steps in the lesson to help you first identify between active and passive voice sentences and then to rewrite passive voice sentences into active voice sentences.

Assignment 1C: Rewrite these passive voice sentences into active voice sentences.

First, identify the performer of the action. This will become the subject of your active voice sentence. (If there is no performer, you made need to supply a subject for clarity.) Secondly, identify the verb tense (present, past, or future). Make sure to retain this verb tense in your active voice sentence.

1. The dishes were washed by Jane.
2. After the game, hamburgers were bought for everyone.
3. During the intermission, several numbers were played by our band.
4. The pen was broken by Ally.
5. My computer was fixed by Miss Jones.
6. The volleyball game was lost by the red team.
7. The blouse was washed and ironed by Ruth.
8. The money was found under the floor.
9. The songs were memorized by Eleanor.
10. The accident was reported by the officer.

USING PASSIVE VOICE –

If you read the following passive voice sentences, you can obviously tell that they would be better written/spoken in the active voice.

- “The game was watched by us at the stadium.”
- “The dog was fed by Thomas.”
- “The life was risked by the stunt man.”
- “Many tricks have been learned by the dolphins.”

The problem is that use of passive voice often produces writing that is weak, wordy, and vague. Therefore, active voice is preferable because of its directness and clarity of meaning. That being said, there are legitimate uses for the passive voice. In order to use the passive voice well, you must be aware of its benefits and then employ it deliberately for a certain effect.

There are three instances in which use of the passive voice is legitimate.

1. The action's performer is unknown, irrelevant, or obvious.

- “Up to 90% of the energy in light bulbs is wasted in the form of heat.” [the action's performer is irrelevant.]
- “My Uncle Marvin was wounded in Vietnam.” [the action's performer is likely unknown.]
- “Delegates to the convention have already been selected.” [the action's performer may be known, but is probably both obvious and irrelevant.]

2. The action's performer is less important than the action.

- “The honey bees were kept in a humidified chamber at room temperature overnight.” [the focus of this sentence is the honey bees, so the performer of the action is far less important than the action itself and its recipients.]
- “The solution was heated to 90°C for approximately 30 minutes and then allowed to cool.” [the focus of this sentence is the solution, so the performer of the action is again far less important than the action itself and its recipient.]

3. The recipient of the action is the main topic. (This would usually be implied by preceding sentences, as seen in the example below.)

- “We wish to suggest a structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.). This structure has novel features which are of considerable biological interest. *A structure for nucleic acid has already been proposed by Pauling and Corey.*” [the focus here is the suggested scientific structure, so to change the third sentence to active voice would then disrupt the clarity of the main topic. i.e. is the main topic the suggested scientific structure, or is the main topic Pauling and Corey?]

Unless one of these situations is present, it is generally better to use active voice so as to make the performer of the action clear and to avoid wordy or indirect writing.

Assignment 1D: Write whether the following passive voice sentences should stay as is or be changed to active voice.

1. The girls' gymnastics class was watched by Grandma since she was in town for Thanksgiving.
2. A potential plan to solve the local flooding problem has recently been proposed.
3. A tornado warning has been issued for our country until 2:45 P.M.
4. The tires were checked by the mechanic during our annual vehicle inspection.
5. I enjoyed class today because the lesson was taught by Mrs. Gregory.
6. The chocolate mixture must be heated to 234 degrees Fahrenheit in order for it to properly form fudge.
7. The first novel is believed to have been written by a Japanese woman some 1,000 years ago.
8. My first trip to Europe will always be remembered by me.
9. These facts were documented in a letter dated January 13, 1776.
10. The plants must be watered by Dad before we can leave.