

## BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY WRITING CENTER GRAMMAR SHEET

### Passive Voice.

Whenever possible, avoid passive voice. Passive voice has less action and less immediacy; it makes prose feel officious and weak. The opposite of passive voice is active voice, the voice which you should use whenever possible

**Passive voice:** Passive voice is a verbal construction in which what should be the subject is deferred and what would normally be the direct object stands in as the subject. If what should be the subject is included at all, it is found in a prepositional phrase (usually a *by* prepositional phrase). A passive verb usually has two parts (sometimes it has more): a version of the verb *to be* and a past participle. To activate a sentence with passive voice, ask yourself: "Who is the subject? Who is doing the action?" Then rearrange the sentence accordingly.

Examples:

*The ball was thrown by the boy.*

*was thrown* is the two-part passive verb. Who did the action? Can a ball throw itself? No. The boy throws the ball. (See that the subject, *the boy*, is found after *by*.) So, the active version of this sentence is: *The boy throws the ball.* This active sentence has fewer words and more action.

*The book was written by the author.*

A book can't write itself! So, the real doer of the action is in the *by* clause: the author. The active version of this sentence reads: *The author wrote the book.* Again, this new sentence has fewer words and more action.

*Mistakes were made.*

Government officials like to use this line when pretending to accept culpability for a situation while still avoiding responsibility. See how no one is doing the action?! We do not know who made the mistakes! Better would be: *The President made mistakes.*

Note: Infrequent and mindful use of the passive voice can be rhetorically effective; however, you should use the active voice most frequently.

EXERCISE: Change the following sentences from passive voice to active voice. If the passive construction has no noun which can be the subject, invent a subject for the active construction.

1. The kitchen should have been cleaned.
2. The Hurricane Katrina relief efforts were poorly coordinated by FEMA.
3. Le Corbusier, the famous modernist architect, is still praised by critics.
4. My head was filled from all the information in class.

**Answers:** (1) The cook [or other noun] should have cleaned the kitchen. (2) FEMA coordinated poorly Hurricane Katrina relief efforts. (3) Critics still praise Le Corbusier, the famous modernist architect. (4) All the information in class filled my head. [through the preposition "from" replaces the preposition "by" here, "the information in class" can still easily function as the subject.]