Passive versus Active Voice

The following questions will be briefly discussed:

- When is it appropriate to use a passive or active style of writing?
- What is the difference between the two?
- What are some examples of each writing style?

Active voice is used more often in scientific and academic work, and is usually the preferred writing style at the university level. Passive voice is a much more indirect way of saying the same thing, and is more likely to appear in non-academic writing pieces.

Active voice makes the agent (often an individual person) the subject of the sentence. Passive voice makes the action the subject. Active writing is a lot clearer more direct than passive, and is often in a shorter sentence.

For example:

- “Bill drove the car down the street”
  This is an active voice as Bill is the subject of the sentence.

- “The car was driven down the street by Bill”
  This is a passive voice as the action is the subject of the sentence.

- “Management were concerned about the level of days off the workers were having”
  This is active voice as management are the subject of the sentence.

- “The level of days off, the workers were having, was a concern to the management of the company”
  This is passive voice as “the level of days off” is the subject of the sentence.

As you can see by the examples above, passive voice is a more indirect way of saying the same thing. Active voice is preferred in writing as it is a lot clearer to the reader, and it is a lot less tiring and time consuming to read. If you are able to focus your writing on having an active voice, you will be able to say a lot more in less words and present a piece that is easier to understand.

If you are unsure about using the two different writing styles in your work feel free to come and discuss it with a Peer Writing Tutor. Refer to the website for timetable details.

Tim Ryan
October 2012