Active vs. Passive Voice

Active Voice:

- Example: *Allie ate the whole cake.*
- These sentences always use the pattern: **Subject—Verb—Object**
- Here “Allie” is the subject of the sentence, “ate” is the verb, and “the cake” is the object.
- The subject (the main noun) of the sentence is completing the action (the verb). The object is the noun receiving the action.

Passive Voice:

- Example: *The whole cake was eaten by Allie.*
- These sentences follow a structure that inverts the active voice pattern. Instead of the object receiving the action, the subject receives the action. The pattern **Subject—Verb—Object** doesn’t change, but their relationship with one another does.
- Here “cake” is the subject, but instead of doing the action in the sentence, it is receiving the action. “Was eaten” is the verb structure. “Allie” is the object of the preposition “by,” not the object of the verb. The object of the preposition tells us who or what is completing the action. Who ate the cake? Allie ate the cake.

When and why should you avoid passive voice?

- When you wish to be direct; using active voice provides more emphasis and strength.
- When you wish to attribute action clearly to an actor—passive voice can hide attribution/blame.
- The passive voice is appropriate if you want to emphasize the receiver of the action and/or minimize the importance of the actor.

Things To Remember:

- Passive voice is not a grammatical error, but it can detract from the clarity in your writing. Some disciplines actually prefer it.
- A good indicator that you are using passive voice is use of a “to be” verb (is, was, has, have) and a past participle (verb ending in –ed or –en). However, this is not always the case.
Example: *The whole cake WAS eaten by Allie.*

- In order to avoid passive voice, make sure that the subject of your sentence is the noun that is completing the action.

  Example: *Jim threw the ball.* Jim is the subject, and he is the one throwing the ball.