What are passive and active voices?

English verbs have two voices: active voice and passive voice. In active voice, the person acting is clear: "The manager wrote the report yesterday." The person acting is the manager.

In passive voice, the writer does not specify who is acting: "The report was written yesterday." It could have been written by the secretary, George Bush, or the manager--we don't know.

The sentence is still in passive voice if the writer specifies the actor later in the sentence: "The report was written yesterday by the manager."

Use passive voice sparingly

Passive voice is still appropriate for some sentences. However, business writers should use the passive voice very sparingly. It may make the writing unclear by keeping the identity of the actor secret.

Passive voice is also a poor choice for sentences because it often sounds awkward and evasive. Readers may interpret passive voice as an attempt to avoid admitting responsibility, as in the following example:

"A mistake was made that resulted in an overcharge to your account that has now been corrected and will be shown on your next statement."

Active voice is more direct and concise than passive voice. Active voice sounds more responsible: "Our data entry clerk made a mistake and overcharged your account, but she corrected the entry. Your next statement will show the correction."

Usually use passive voice when you do not know the actor, you want to hide the identity of the actor, or the actor is not important to the meaning of the sentence.

Changing passive voice to active voice

To change passive voice to active, identify the performer of the action. If the performer is in a "by the" phrase, move the performer to the subject position, just before the verb. If the writer did not name a performer, choose a subject that fits the context. "The test results will be announced next week" easily becomes "We will announce the test results next week" or "The researchers will announce the test results next week."

Avoid mixing active and passive voice in the same sentence. The first half of this sentence is active, but the second half is passive: "We found the lost contract, and the client was notified immediately." Instead, use active voice throughout: "We found the lost contract and notified the client immediately."
Practice changing passive voice to active voice

Find the passive verbs in the following sentences. Change them to active voice.

1. The report will be reviewed by the supervisor before it is sent to the manager.

2. Errors were found in the self-audit, but steps have been taken to correct them.

3. The current status report has been attached, and I have highlighted the important figures.

4. Not before the survey responses have been collected and tabulated will it be possible to know the opinions of our employees.

5. According to the customer service representative, reshipment of these items will be considered when the customer's need is determined by the company.

Answers for changing passive voice to active voice

These are correct responses to the above questions. HINT- (you could also use them to practice changing from active voice back to passive.)

1. The supervisor will review the report before he sends it to the manager.

2. We found errors in the self-audit, but we have corrected them.

3. I have attached the current status report, and I highlighted the important figures.

4. We must collect and tabulate the survey responses before we can know our employees' opinions.

5. According to the customer service representative, the company will consider reshipping these items based on the customer's needs.