Active and Passive Voice
Foundation Lesson—High School

About this Lesson
One of the effects good writers consider in constructing their own style is choosing between active and passive voice in their sentences. The concept of active and passive voice is often misunderstood by students, and many teachers believe that the use of passive voice should be avoided altogether. Their reasoning is that passive voice is often misused or overused and that it obscures meaning in student writing. But the way to teach effective writing and revision is not by banning passive voice entirely. Instead, teachers can demonstrate to students the importance of becoming more aware of the vigor of active verbs and the occasional rhetorical purposes of using passive voice. The exercises in this lesson will help students become more familiar with the proper use of active and passive voice. The ultimate transfer of skills, however, comes not with isolated exercises but through revision of students’ active/passive constructions in their own compositions.

This lesson is included in Module 3: Integrating Grammar, Exploring Syntax.

Objectives
Students will

• demonstrate understanding of the differences between active and passive voice and of the contextual effects and purposes of each.
• consciously manipulate voice in their own writing for stylistic effect.

Level
Grades Nine through Ten

Connection to Common Core Standards for English Language Arts
The activities in this lesson allow teachers to address the following Common Core Standards:

Explicitly addressed in this lesson

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Level of Thinking</th>
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<td>R.I.9-10.1</td>
<td>Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.</td>
<td>Understand</td>
<td>III</td>
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<td>R.I.9-10.5</td>
<td>Analyze in detail how an author’s ideas or claims are developed and refined by particular sentences, paragraphs, or larger portions of a text (e.g., a section or chapter).</td>
<td>Analyze</td>
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<tr>
<td>R.I.9-10.6</td>
<td>Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how the author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.</td>
<td>Analyze</td>
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### RI.9-10.10
By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 9-10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range. By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literary nonfiction at the high end of the grades 9-10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

### L.9-10.3
Use knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.
- Write and edit work so that it conforms to the guidelines in a style manual (e.g., *MLA Handbook*, Turabian’s *Manual for Writers*) appropriate for the discipline and writing type.

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| L.9-10.1 | Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.  
  a. Use parallel structure.  
  b. Use various types of phrases (noun, verb, adjectival, adverbial, participial, prepositional, absolute) and clauses (independent, dependent, noun, relative, adverbial) to convey specific meanings and add variety and interest to writing or presentations. | Understand | I |
| L.9-10.2 | Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.  
  a. Use a semicolon (and perhaps a conjunctive adverb) to link two or more closely related independent clauses.  
  b. Use a colon to introduce a list or quotation.  
  c. Spell correctly. | Understand | I |
| W.9-10.5 | Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific audience. (Editing for conventions should demonstrate command of Language standards 1-3 up to and including grades 9-10). | Evaluate | III |
LTF® Skill Focus
The foundation for LTF English lessons is the Skill Progression Chart that identifies key skills for each domain, beginning with grade 6 and adding more complex skills at each subsequent grade level while reinforcing skills introduced at previous grade levels. The Skill Focus for each individual lesson identifies the skills actually addressed in that lesson.

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<td>written, spoken, and visual products</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understand</td>
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<td>Apply</td>
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<td>Apply</td>
<td>Meaning and Effect related to syntax</td>
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<td>Imitation of Stylistic Models</td>
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Connections to AP*
Effective writing, including meaningful use of active and passive voice, is a task that is required of students in the free response section of both the AP English Literature and AP English Language exams.

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Materials and Resources
- copies of Student Activity

Assessments
The following kinds of formative assessments are embedded in this lesson:
- guided questions
- revision activities

Teaching Suggestions
Although active/passive voice is introduced on the Skill Progression Charts at ninth grade, middle grades teachers may introduce the concept to their students as well. Middle grades students can identify and analyze the effect created by different kinds of verbs without being able to label those verbs as active or passive. Included at the end of this lesson is a middle grades activity based on a passage from *The Giver.*
Middle grades teachers should consider using sentence strips, following the steps below, to clarify the difference between active voice and passive voice.

**Strip 1:** Write *Jack* on the front; write *by Jack* on the back.
**Strip 2:** Write *climbed* on the front; write *was climbed* on the back.
**Strip 3:** Write *the beanpole* on the front; write *The beanpole* on the back.

Have three students hold the strips so that the active voice sentence faces the group (*Jack climbed the beanpole*). Point out to students that, in an active voice sentence, the subject is performing the action of the verb. Have students turn over the sentence strips and rearrange themselves to create a passive voice sentence (*The beanpole was climbed by Jack*). Point out to students that in passive voice sentences the subject no long performs the action of the verb.

Create at least two more examples of active/passive voice sentences using sentence strips. The “hands-on” manipulation of words is a good strategy to help visual and kinesthetic learners understand the concept of active/passive voice.

**Answers (High School Activities)**

**Activity One**

1a. *Jack climbed the beanpole.*
1b. *Jose hit the ball right out of the park.*
1c. *The contrite child learned a lesson.*
2a. *A great deal of thinking has been done lately by Val.*
2b. *The nest was built from small twigs by the bluebird.*
2c. *Many sonnets addressed to a mysterious “dark lady” were written by Shakespeare.*

3b. Active—*Your messy room needs to be cleaned by you.*
3c. Passive—*Manufacturers have built many new plants along the border between El Paso, Texas, and Mexico.*
3d. Passive—*John’s actions embarrassed the whole class.*
3e. Active—*A good time was had by us.*

4. Answers will vary but might include any or all of the active sentences rewritten as passive sentences, especially b and e.

5. The mountains of Colorado offer spectacular views and activities. *Herd of elk can be seen crossing the highways.* *I can see herds of elk crossing the highways.* Limpid streams flow through valleys. *Snow can be observed capping the tops of mountains.* *I also observe snow capping the tops of mountains.* The biggest attraction of Colorado, though, for skiers is the perfect ski slopes. *Ideal conditions can be obtained on the slopes of Colorado.* *They can obtain ideal conditions on the slopes of Colorado.* Skiers flock to this state at the first snowfall. *The annual thirty feet of snow is highly desired by skiers.* *Skiers highly desire the annual thirty feet of snow.*

**Activity Two**

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, *(that someone created all men equal)* that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, *(that their Creator endows them with certain unalienable Rights)* that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men.
(someone institutes Governments among Men) deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes (that no one should change long established Governments for light and transient causes); and accordingly all experience hath shown, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.

2. Answers will vary. Suggestions are included in text above.

3. Answers will vary. Jefferson emphasizes the importance of men and their equality, the universality of their rights, and the role and importance of Government by his choice of subjects in these sentences.

4. Answers will vary. The emphasis shifts to the persons or being who “create,” “endow,” “institute,” and “change,” rather than to those who are affected by these actions.

Activity Three
1.a. Active
1.b. Any price shall be paid, any burden borne, any hardship met, any friend supported, any foe opposed to assure the survival and the success of liberty.
1.c. Answers will vary. The revised sentence is not as forceful as the original; the emphasis shifts to the former direct objects and away from those important actions “we” are willing to take.

2.a. Passive
2.b. In the long history of the world, circumstances have granted only a few generations the role of defending freedom in its hours of maximum danger.
2.c. Answers will vary. The revised sentence is less effective because it forces us to identify who/what “granted the role” rather than to emphasize those generations who have risen to the challenge.

3.a. Both are active.
3.b. Our country and all who serve it will be lit by the energy, the faith, and the devotion which we bring to this endeavor, and the world can truly be lit by the glow from that fire.
3.c. Answers will vary. The revised sentence shifts the emphasis from those abstract qualities “we bring to this endeavor” to “our country and all who serve it.” The choice of emphasis might be left to the speaker or writer.

4.a. Both are active.
4.b. Ask not what can be done for you by your country; ask what can be done for your country by you.
4.c. Answers will vary. The revised sentence is weaker because it lessens the importance of the relationship between the individual and his country by reversing their order in the clauses.
Answers (Middle Grades Activity)

1. *Then all of the citizens had been ordered.*
   The subject of this sentence (all) is being acted upon; the sentence is in passive voice. The “actor” is the unnamed voice heard over the speaker.
   Active voice: *The voice over the speaker ordered all of the citizens to go into the nearest building and stay there.*

2. *The passive voice clause is He will be released.* The verb is *will be released,* and the subject is He. The action in this clause is being performed by the unnamed authorities. Writing this clause in active voice is awkward because it must be rewritten with an indefinite pronoun as the subject: *Someone will release him.* We still don’t really know who is performing the action.

3. In all of these sentences, the “actors” are unknown and can only be represented by indefinite pronouns.

4. A sense of mystery occurs because we do not know who is responsible for these actions. Additionally, the use of passive voice highlights the apparent passivity of the citizens in this society.
Active and Passive Voice
Foundation Lesson—High School

Verbs can be in either active or passive voice. In active voice, the subject is performing the action:

*Mortimer scanned the headlines.*

In passive voice, the subject does not act but is acted upon:

*The headlines were scanned by Mortimer.*

Notice that the word that is the subject in the active voice sentence (Mortimer) is the object of the preposition “by” in the passive voice sentence. The word that is the direct object in the active voice sentence (headlines) is now the subject in the passive voice sentence.

Another clue to passive voice is that the sentence will have some version of a “be” verb (am, are, is, was, were) plus a past participle. The verb in the passive sentence above is “were scanned.”

### Activity One

1. Change these sentences, written in passive voice, to active voice. Highlight the subject and make this word the direct object in your new sentence.
   a. The beanpole was climbed by Jack.
   b. The ball was hit right out of the park. (You will have to supply the subject.)
   c. A lesson was learned by the contrite child.

2. Now practice changing these sentences written in active voice to passive voice. Highlight the subject and make this word the object of a preposition in your new sentence.
   a. Val has done a great deal of thinking lately.
   b. The bluebird built its nest from small twigs.
   c. Shakespeare wrote many sonnets addressed to a mysterious “dark lady.”

3. Mark the following sentences as either “active” or “passive.” Then change active sentences to passive and passive sentences to active. You may have to supply a subject.
   a. John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963.
   b. You need to clean your messy room.
   c. Many new manufacturing plants have been built along the border between El Paso, Texas, and Mexico.
   d. The whole class was embarrassed by his actions.
   e. We had a good time.
4. In the following paragraph, highlight the sentences written in passive voice. Then change those sentences to active voice. Use first person point of view as needed.

The mountains of Colorado offer spectacular views and activities. Herds of elk can be seen crossing the highways. Limpid streams flow through valleys. Snow can be observed capping the tops of mountains. The biggest attraction of Colorado, though, for skiers is the perfect ski slopes. Ideal conditions can be obtained on the slopes of Colorado. Skiers flock to this state at the first snowfall. The annual thirty feet of snow is highly desired by skiers.

Generally speaking, active voice is preferable because of its directness and clarity of meaning. The active voice lends strength and vigor to sentences because the subject is clearly performing the action.

Passive voice often produces writing that is weak and vague.
- Passive voice allows people to evade responsibility for their actions.
  *Yes, Mr. Chairman, mistakes were made.*
  *Your package has been lost.*
  *It has been decided that you no longer have a job here.*
- Passive voice is often awkward and unwieldy and can sound downright silly sometimes.
  *Increased energy can be obtained by exercising daily.*
  *Her first night in her new apartment was spent in organizing the kitchen.*
  *As soon as he wakes up in the morning, planning of his day is begun by him.*
  *To finish knitting the cover for his new sports car, much boredom will have to be endured by him.*

However, there are legitimate uses for passive voice. The trick lies in being aware that passive voice is a choice that you can make deliberately for a certain effect.
- Sometimes the performer of the action is not known.
  *The statue of the cherub was stolen right out of her front yard.*
  *The soldier was shot trying to cross the snow-covered field.*
  *Marvin was wounded in Vietnam.*
- Passive voice is useful in technical, legal, and scientific writing, where it is not necessary to know the performer of the action.
  *The artery was cauterized and surgically ligated.*
  *“So far as we know, from Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity, the universe is constructed in such a way...that no material object and no information can be transmitted faster than the velocity of light.”* (Carl Sagan, *Broca’s Brain*)
Activity Two

Read the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence and answer the questions that follow.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.

1. Highlight the sentences or clauses whose verbs are in passive voice.

2. Rewrite them in active voice.

3. What is the effect of Thomas Jefferson’s use of passive voice?

4. What is the effect after these passive voice constructions are changed to the active voice?

Activity Three

The following sentences are lines from John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address, delivered January 20, 1961. Follow the directions in changing the voice. Two examples are provided for you.

Example One

“For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life.”

a. active voice

b. change to passive: The power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life is held in man’s mortal hands.

c. effect of changing to passive voice: Man is not performing the action now. Kennedy wanted to stress both the humanity and the divine attributes of man. He did not intend for the emphasis to be placed on the “power,” but on “man” and his power to create both good and ill.
Example Two
“...the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans, born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage....”

a. passive voice

b. change to active: You will have to decide who passed this torch and use that as your subject.

Our ancestors passed this torch to a new generation of Americans....
Those who died defending this country passed this torch to a new generation....
The previous generation passed this torch to a new generation....
The previous administration passed this torch to a new generation....
The first Americans passed this torch to a new generation....

c. effect of changing to active voice: What is important is not who passed the torch but the torch itself. To name a subject that passed the torch emphasizes people in America at an earlier time in history, and Kennedy is emphasizing the Americans of his day and his administration.

Your turn:
1. “Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”

a. Determine if the underlined part is in active or passive voice.

b. Change the voice.

c. What is the effect? Is the sentence equally effective in either voice?

2. “In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hours of maximum danger.”

a. Determine if the sentence is in active or passive voice.

b. Change the voice.

c. What is the effect? Is the sentence equally effective in either voice?

3. “The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it, and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.”

a. Determine if the underlined parts are in active or passive voice.

b. Change the voice.
c. What is the effect? Is the sentence equally effective in either voice?

4. “And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”
   a. Determine if the underlined part is in active or passive voice.
   b. Change the voice.
   c. What is the effect? Is the sentence equally effective in either voice?

**Challenge**

After you have written a draft of your next writing assignment, revise your writing by highlighting every sentence in which you have used passive voice. Change the passive verbs to active wherever possible.
Active and Passive Voice
Middle Grades Activity

Verbs can be in either active or passive voice.

In active voice, the subject is performing the action:

Mortimer scanned the headlines.
(subject) (verb) (direct object)

In passive voice, the subject does not perform the action but is acted upon:

The headlines were scanned by Mortimer.
(subject) (verb) (prepositional phrase)

Notice that the subject in the active voice sentence (Mortimer) is the object of the preposition “by” in the passive voice sentence. And the word that is the direct object in the active voice sentence is now the subject.

Another clue to passive voice is that the sentence has some version of a “be” verb (am, are, is, was, were) plus a past participle. The verb in the passive voice sentence above is “were scanned.”

Read the following passage from the second page of Lois Lowry’s novel *The Giver*.

Then all of the citizens had been ordered to go into the nearest building and stay there. IMMEDIATELY, the rasping voice through the speakers had said, LEAVE YOUR BICYCLES WHERE THEY ARE. . . .

Within minutes the speakers had crackled again, and the voice, reassuring now and less urgent, had explained that a Pilot-in-Training had misread his navigational instructions and made a wrong turn. Desperately the Pilot had been trying to make his way back before his error was noticed.

NEEDLESS TO SAY, HE WILL BE RELEASED, the voice had said, followed by silence. There was an ironic tone to that final message, as if the Speaker found it amusing; and Jonas had smiled a little, though he knew what a grim statement it had been. For a contributing citizen to be released from the community was a final decision, a terrible punishment, an overwhelming statement of failure.

Activity: Now answer these questions about the sentences in the passage.
1. Read again the first sentence in the first paragraph, noting that it is in passive voice:

Then all of the citizens had been ordered to go into the nearest building and stay there.

The last part of this sentence consists of an infinitive phrase (“to go into the nearest building and stay there”). If we delete this infinitive phrase, we are left with the following clause:

Then all of the citizens had been ordered.
Underline twice the three-word verb phrase, “had been ordered,” in this clause. The subject of this sentence is “all.” (Remember that “of the citizens” is a prepositional phrase.) Underline the subject once.

Is the subject of this sentence performing the action or being acted upon? ______________

Is this sentence in active or passive voice? ________________________________

Who is the “actor” in this sentence? ________________________________

Do we know his or her name? Explain. ________________________________

Rewrite this sentence in active voice. ________________________________

2. The first sentence in the third paragraph contains one clause written in passive voice. Write that clause here: ________________________________

What is the verb in this clause? ________________________________

What is the subject in this clause? ________________________________

Who is performing the action in this clause? ________________________________

Although you can rewrite this clause in active voice without knowing who is performing the action, the resulting clause seems awkward. Why? ________________________________

3. Read the following sentences, also in passive voice, which appear in the early pages of the novel:

   Most of the people on the night crew had not even been given spouses. . . .
   It was written very clearly in the rules.
   [Y]our comfort object will be taken away.

Why is it awkward to try to write these sentences in active voice without knowing who is making the decisions, making the rules? ________________________________

4. How does Lowry’s use of passive voice in these early paragraphs create a sense of mystery and tension? ________________________________