Active vs. Passive Voice

Problem: The PASSIVE VOICE is useful in some situations. However, when it is used incorrectly, it can dilute your prose and make it unclear.

Solution: Understand the structure of both active and passive voice.

Active Voice: The subject of the sentence is the one doing the action.

Examples:

The teachers compared the success rate between the two groups of students.

The student was asking the librarian for help.

You should tell her not to cheat.

Passive Voice: The subject of the sentence is being acted upon (most likely by the object of the sentence). A sentence in passive voice is constructed with a form of the verb “to be” and usually includes (or implies) the word “by.”

Examples:

The language of the students was compared (by the researchers).

The client was already being seen (by the doctor).

She should be warned.

Critical reading skills are important to complete the assignment.

Solution: Know when to use Active vs. Passive Voice.

1) Use active voice unless there is a good reason not to. Active voice makes your writing more vivid and clear.
Examples:

Passive (weak): The house was leveled by the tornado.
Active (vivid): The furious tornado stripped the house to its foundations.

Passive (weak): Spirits were low after the football game was lost.
Active (vivid): A final heartbreaking interception ended the game and crushed the home team’s spirits.

Passive (unclear): The students were advised not to drink on school nights.
Active (clear): The Health Center advised students about the risks of drinking on school nights.

2) Use Passive Voice to emphasize a process in scientific or technical writing.

   Example: Next, the magnets are calibrated to align with the laser beam.

3) Use Passive Voice to place attention on the object, rather than the subject.

   Example: The new parking garage will be completed sometime next month.
   (Focus is on the parking garage, not the construction workers who are making it.)

4) Use Passive Voice to place old information before new information when you want to make smooth transitions:

   Example: When composing your résumé and cover letter, be sure to proofread. Grammatical errors are often used to weed out job applicants.
   (Emphasis here is on the errors, not the employers.)