Passive voice is not a grammar error, but an emphasis choice that could cost you some clarity.

Active voice is generally considered preferable in written prose because it creates a stronger, often clearer, and more interesting sentence. However, the sentence you just read, written in the passive voice, illustrates one case where passive may reign superior: when naming the object acted upon is more important than naming the actor performing the action or if the actor is unknown. Another acceptable use of the passive voice is among writers in the sciences and social sciences, where the importance of procedures and results outweighs that of the developer or producer of those results: The data was entered and tabulated, using multiple regression analysis.

To distinguish between active and passive construction is to distinguish between four situations. Most importantly, in the active voice the subject does the acting, while passive finds the subject being acted upon. In addition, some verbs resemble passive voice, but they indicate progressive action or state of being. For example:

**Active voice:** The shortstop caught the ball.
**Passive voice:** The ball was caught by the shortstop.
**Progressive action:** The shortstop was catching the ball.
**Verb of being:** The shortstop was a good player.

To spot a passive construction, first look for some form of the verb “to be.” This, in conjunction with the past participle of the main verb, and sometimes an additional helping verb, is required for passive voice: was caught. However, while the “be” verb must be present for the construction to be passive, use of the “be” verb does not guarantee that the sentence is passive. Often, people do not have a good grasp of this point and may feel that any use of this verb should be avoided. Since you can often write a stronger, clearer, more creative sentence by constructing it with another verb, and since use of another verb ensures that you have avoided the passive voice, you would probably find it advantageous to explore this strategy frequently.

**Examples of “state of being” verbs that are NOT passive voice:**

- It is elementary.
- We are friends.
- Flowers are pretty.
- Samuel and Flossie are moving to the country tomorrow.
One sentence in each series below contains a passive voice verb. Can you identify it?

Series 1
______Mistakes were made by the census-takers.
______The census-takers made a mistake.
______Mistakes were inevitable.
______Mistakes were happening regularly.

Series 2
______The typewriter was revolutionizing the workplace.
______The typewriter was invented in 1867.
______The typewriter was a revolutionary invention.
______Christopher Sholes invented the typewriter.

Series 3
______Intubation was performed using a tracheal tube.
______The EMT performed the intubation using a tracheal tube.
______Intubation was successful.
______The EMT was performing the intubation using a tracheal tube.

Series 4
______The playground was ADA-compliant in design.
______The playground was designed by elementary school students themselves.
______Elementary school students were designing the playground themselves.
______Elementary school students designed the playground themselves.

Series 5
______The state of Massachusetts enacted the first compulsory education law in 1852.
______While the state of Massachusetts was enacting the first compulsory education law, other states let families treat education as a personal choice.
______The first compulsory education law was in Massachusetts in 1852.
______The first compulsory education law was enacted by the state of Massachusetts in 1852.

Answers
Series 1: were made
Series 2: was invented
Series 3: was performed
Series 4: was designed
Series 5: was enacted

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