Active and Passive Voice

The voice of an action verb indicates whether the subject performs or receives the action.

When the subject of a verb performs the action, the verb is in the active voice.

Traditional poetry uses rhyme. (The subject, poetry, performs the action.)

When the subject of a verb receives the action, the verb is in the passive voice.

Rhyme is used in traditional poetry. (The subject, rhyme, receives the action.)

The passive form is often used when the person or thing performing the action is indefinite or unknown. It is formed by using an appropriate form of be with the past participle of the main verb.

Identifying Active and Passive Voice

The main verb in each sentence is in boldfaced type. If the performer of the action named by that verb is identified, underline that word or phrase. On the line to the right, write A if the verb is in active voice or P if it is in passive voice.

Sample This poem was written by Gerard Manley Hopkins.  P

1. Gerard Manley Hopkins was born in England in 1844.
2. His poems, such as “The Windhover” and “Pied Beauty,” influenced 20th-century English poets.
3. He entered the Jesuit order of Roman Catholicism in his early twenties.
4. The poems he had already written were destroyed.
5. After learning and studying Welsh, he was inspired to write poetry again.
6. Hopkins wrote many of his poems about the natural world.
7. His poems were structured in a manner quite unlike other poetry of his time.
8. His metric technique is called “sprung rhythm” because it has an abrupt rhythm rather than a smooth one.
9. He used internal rhyme and alliteration to portray the uniqueness of natural objects.
10. Hopkins moved to Ireland where he became a professor at University College.
11. He wrote a series of poems that are called the “terrible sonnets.”
12. He was born between the world of senses and his religious vocation.
13. For the most part, his poems were published posthumously.
14. The first edition of his work was published in 1918, almost 30 years after his death.
A. Identifying Active and Passive Voice Verbs
Underline the main verb in each sentence. On the line to the right, label the verb A for active voice or P for passive voice.

1. Vanessa writes a poetry column for a literary magazine.  
   
2. Her columns have been printed regularly for the last three years.  
   
3. Young poets have been interviewed for the columns.  
   
4. The column has featured her delightful sense of humor.  
   
5. Besides poems from new writers, she especially likes Hispanic poetry.  
   
6. Her audience is alerted to programs featuring poets as speakers.  

B. Identifying and Changing the Voice of Verbs
If a sentence is in the active voice, rewrite the sentence, changing the verb to passive voice. If a sentence is in the passive voice, decide whether the passive construction is better than the active would be. If it is better in passive, write Correct as is on the blank line. If it is not, rewrite the sentence in the active voice.

   EXAMPLE  Cotton Mather praised Anne Bradstreet's poetry.
          Anne Bradstreet's poetry was praised by Cotton Mather.

1. The American poet Anne Bradstreet published only one book in her lifetime.
   
2. In fact, the manuscript was taken without her knowledge by her brother-in-law.  
   
3. He took the manuscript from Massachusetts to a publisher in London.  
   
4. Bradstreet was born in England, probably in 1612.  
   
5. Eight children were raised by her in the newly founded Massachusetts colony.  
   
6. Her feelings about her Massachusetts house burning down are described in one of her well-known poems.  
   
7. Another famous poem expresses her great love for her husband.
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A. Revising to Avoid Passive Voice
Revise this paragraph, changing verbs from passive to active voice where appropriate.

William Cullen Bryant was born in 1794 in Cummington, Massachusetts. "Thanatopsis," his most famous poem, was written when he was 16 years old. His first volume, Poems, was published when he was only 27 years old. The poem "To a Waterfowl," was included in this volume. His poems were written about nature, like the poems of the English poet William Wordsworth. The Berkshire Hills in western Massachusetts were beautifully described by him in several of his poems. The abolition of slavery had been supported by him well before the outbreak of the Civil War.

B. Using Active and Passive Voice
Choose a work of poetry that you are familiar with and enjoy. It may be a lyric poem, a humorous poem, an excerpt from a play written in poetry (such as a speech from one of Shakespeare's works), or any other form of poem, rhymed or not. Write a brief essay explaining why you enjoy the poem. In your essay, use active voice and passive voice verbs in roughly equal numbers.