OBJECTIVES
Students will
● identify active and passive constructions in literary and nonfiction texts.
● analyze the stylistic effect of passive or active constructions in texts.
● create and revise sentences so that they reflect active or passive constructions.

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. Students often misunderstand the concept of active and passive voice. Admittedly, passive voice frequently is misused or overused, and it can obscure meaning in student writing. Instead of banning passive voice entirely, however, 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. While 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 comes not with isolated exercises but through revision of students’ active/passive constructions in their own compositions.

TEXT COMPLEXITY
Passages for National Math and Science Initiative (NMSI) English lessons are selected to challenge students, while lessons and activities make texts accessible. Guided practice with challenging texts allows students to gain the proficiency necessary to read independently. This lesson uses short excerpts from The Giver by Lois Lowry and the Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson to introduce and then reinforce the skills of identifying and revising active and passive constructions. Teachers are encouraged to use the strategies presented in this lesson with complex texts from their own curriculum to allow students opportunities to practice writing more sophisticated sentence constructions.
English—Active and Passive Voice

Cognitive Rigor

English lessons for NMSI are designed to guide students through a continuum of increasingly complex thinking skills, including those outlined in taxonomies such as the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy and Webb’s Depth of Knowledge levels. For example, in this lesson, students will identify passive and active structures in a complex text (DOK Level 1), apply simple organizational structures in writing (DOK Level 2), and analyze how authors use passive and active structures to create meaning and effect (DOK Level 3). Over the course of the lesson, students will move from the Remember and Understand levels of the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy to the Analyze and Create levels.

This lesson is included in Module 3: Generating Text-Based Responses.

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

W.8.5: With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed.

L.8.1.b: Form and use verbs in the active and passive voice.

Connections to AP*

The ability to analyze how an author manipulates language for effect is one component of a student’s ability to read proficiently and independently. By extension, students in college and career readiness classrooms will develop more clarity and sophistication in their own writing style as they apply active and passive structures to create effects and reinforce meaning in their own writing. Both the AP English Literature and the AP English Language exams ask students to consider syntactical analysis, including active and passive structures, in both the free response and multiple choice sections.

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Materials and Resources

- copies of the Student Activity
- prepared sentence strips

Assessments

The following kinds of formative assessments are embedded in this lesson:

- revision activities
- guided questions
TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

This lesson works well at the beginning of an academic year as an introduction to analyzing and revising skills. Because this strategy can be used with any complex text, you might consider using the approach with a text that is part of your curriculum, or you can spiral the skill of identifying and rewriting active and passive constructions found in texts students read throughout the year. The activities are designed to stand alone; you might wish to introduce each activity at different points in the year, depending on your students’ needs and the type of literature you are studying. Also, your students may already understand how to identify active and passive constructions, so you may decide that they do not need to complete the initial activities.

When introducing this skill, you could begin by projecting several example active and passive voice sentences or by writing them on the whiteboard. (The Student Activity has two examples included in the first gray box: The student wrote an essay and The essay was written by the student.) Explain that in active constructions, the subject performs the action, while in passive voice, the subject is acted upon. Students should notice that the word that is the subject in the active voice sentence (student) is the object of the preposition by in the passive voice sentence. The word that is the direct object in the active voice sentence (essay) 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, is, are, was, were) plus a past participle. The verb in the passive sentence above is was written.

Once students are able to identify active and passive constructions, you might discuss with them reasons why writers would choose one form over the other. 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. Conversely, passive voice often produces writing that is weak and vague. For example:

- Passive voice allows people to evade responsibility for their actions.  
  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 silly sometimes.  
  Increased energy can be obtained by exercising daily.  
  Her first night in her new apartment was spent organizing the kitchen.  
  As soon as he wakes up in the morning, planning of his day is begun 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.

- 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 One: Identifying Voice
Having students manipulate sentences by changing them from active to passive voice (or vice versa) is one strategy to help students identify the constructions in their writing and in the writing of others. An easy way to have students manipulate sentences in this fashion is to create sentence strips that allow students to move and change parts of sentences without having to erase and rewrite on their own paper. Consider using sentences that relate to the literature you are reading in class or that reinforce content such as mythological or historical allusions. For example, the following sentences deal with Greek mythology:

Active: Daedalus created the labyrinth.
Passive: The labyrinth was created by Daedalus.

To create the sentence strips, you will divide the sentences into chunks and write the “active voice” sentence on one side of the strips and the “passive voice” sentence on the back of the strips. Follow the example below:

Example:
Strip 1: Write Daedalus on the front; write by Daedalus on the back.
Strip 2: Write created on the front; write was created on the back.
Strip 3: Write The labyrinth on the front; write the labyrinth on the back.

Have three students hold the strips so that the active voice sentence faces the class (Daedalus created the labyrinth). 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 labyrinth was created by Daedalus). Point out to students that in passive voice sentences the subject no longer performs the action of the verb; instead, it is “acted upon.”

Activity Two: Manipulating Voice
Students will recognize how they use passive voice for effect in their own lives. For example, if an individual wishes to avoid responsibility for a mistake, he or she might explain to a parent that “The milk was spilled on the countertop,” as opposed to “I spilled the milk and failed to clean up the mess.” Before beginning this activity, you might ask students to think of moments when they would avoid specifying a responsible actor/subject when writing or speaking.

This activity asks students to evaluate the effect of passive and active constructions. Divide students into groups of two, and ask them to identify the passive voice sentences. Then, ask them to rewrite the sentences so that they are in the active voice. Have student pairs compare their rewritten paragraph to the original and discuss which constructions seem stronger or more precise. Then, student pairs could share their responses with the entire class.

Create at least two more examples of active/passive voice sentences using sentence strips. In keeping with the mythology subject matter, other sentences you could use include

Active: Hades kidnapped Persephone.
Passive: Persephone was kidnapped by Hades.

Active: Echo loved Narcissus.
Passive: Narcissus was loved by Echo.

On the NMSI website, a supporting file that contains these example sentences is attached to this lesson. The active/passive sentences are formatted so that if you print these pages front/back, they are ready for you to cut them into strips for your classroom.
Activity Three: Analyzing Effect
This passage from Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* is an excellent example of how passive voice is used deliberately to create a specific mood. If this is your students’ first introduction to analyzing active/passive voice, you may consider doing this activity as a whole class, modeling the process of identifying voice and rewriting sentences under the document camera. If your students are ready for more independent work, have them complete the activities in collaborative learning groups and then share their answers with the entire group.

Question 1 asks students to identify subjects and verb phrases as a scaffolded step to help identify passive and active constructions. The first sentence of Paragraph 2 contains a noun clause (“. . . that a Pilot-in-Training had misread his navigational instructions and made a wrong turn”). Depending on the needs of your students, you may decide to have students identify the subject and verbs only in the main clause, or you could open a general conversation about noun clauses and their functions.

As part of your discussion, have students speculate what type of individuals would “order” citizens to perform certain actions or who would punish citizens for making errors. Be sure to ask students why Lowry did not identify the individual(s) who ordered the citizens to take shelter or who “released” the Pilot, and have them discuss what feeling or mood is created by the omission of an “actor” in these sentences. Some students will state that the choice creates a sense of mystery; others will see the omissions as more ominous.

Challenge Activity: Analyzing Voice
For students who are reading at or above grade level and who can identify passive and active constructions, you may decide to have them complete Activity Four, which asks students to analyze the constructions in a short excerpt from the *Declaration of Independence*. Like the passage from *The Giver*, the *Declaration of Independence* omits naming “actors” in some of its sentences. Because the text is highly complex for the eighth grade student, teachers may wish to have students complete the activity as a whole class or in collaborative learning groups.

Note: Students may find the clause “that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves” especially difficult, given the structure of the sentence and the unfamiliar use of the word “disposed.” *Disposed* is an adjective meaning “having an inclination toward something.” Explain to students that only sentences that have a subject, a verb, and an object can be converted into passive voice. Therefore, this clause cannot be rewritten using a passive construction.

Extension: To extend the activity and to reinforce the deliberate use of passive and active constructions in students’ own writing, consider having students revise a draft of a writing assignment by highlighting sentences in which they have used the passive voice. Have students choose two or three sentences either to change to the active voice or to explain why the passive construction is effective.
Active and Passive Voice

**Verbs can be in either active or passive voice.**

In **active voice**, the subject is performing the action: *The student wrote an essay.*

In **passive voice**, the subject does not act but is acted upon: *The essay was written by the student.*

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

**Activity One: Identifying Voice**

This exercise uses sentence strips to help you see the difference between active and passive voice. Follow your teacher’s instructions for completing the activity.

**Activity Two: Manipulating Voice**

In the following paragraph, highlight the sentences written in passive voice. Then, change those sentences to the active voice. Compare your new sentences with the original sentences and discuss with a partner which constructions are clearer or more precise.

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.

**Activity Three: Analyzing Effect**

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.
Re-read the first sentences of paragraphs one and two:

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

Paragraph Two: *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.*

1. In each sentence, underline the subject, and underline the verb phrase twice.

2. Which sentence is written in the passive voice? How can you tell?

3. Rewrite the passive voice sentence from Question 2 so that it is in active voice. You may need to create a specific subject for your sentence.

4. What mood, or feeling, does the author create by not telling us who ordered the citizens to go to the nearest building?

Now, re-read the first sentence of the third paragraph: *Needless to say, he will be released, the voice had said, followed by silence.*

5. Look at the noun clause *he will be released*. Underline the subject and underline the verb phrase twice.

6. Explain how you know the noun clause *he will be released* is a passive construction.

7. Is “being released” a positive or negative consequence for the Pilot? Support your answer with evidence from the passage.

8. Rewrite the entire sentence so that it is in the active voice. You may have to create a specific subject for your new sentence.

9. How does Lowry’s use of passive voice in the early paragraphs of her novel create a sense of mystery and tension?
Challenge Activity: Analyzing Voice

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 the sentences in passive voice so that they are in active voice.

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

4. How are the impact and effect of Jefferson’s words changed when you revise sentences so that the entire paragraph is in the active voice?