



Writing Exercises

Active and Passive Voice in Creative Writing

April 8, 2026

Select Exercise 1 or Exercise 2 (or do both if you're ambitious)



Exercise 1: The Passive Protagonist

A Short Story (500–1000 words)

The Setup

The article uses the example of a stray puppy to illustrate a crucial principle: voice choice follows narrative focus. When the puppy is the emotional center of the story, the passive construction *was found by Billy* is actually the stronger choice, because it keeps the puppy in the subject seat where it belongs.

Your exercise pushes that principle further.

The Prompt

Write a short story of approximately 500–1000 words from the close third-person perspective of one of the following:

- An old dog in an animal shelter on the day a family comes to adopt
- A letter that was never sent, discovered decades later in a box
- A secondhand coat passing from owner to owner over the course of a single winter

Your protagonist — the dog, the letter, the coat — is by nature a recipient of action much of the time. Things happen *to* it. People handle it, ignore it, choose it or don't. Your job is to write the story with full awareness of what that means for voice.

The Requirement

As you draft, you must make at least **three deliberate, conscious choices** to use passive voice — moments where keeping the receiver of the action as your grammatical subject genuinely serves the story better than promoting the human agent to subject would. When you're finished, add a brief **Author's Note** at the end of your story (no more than 150 words) in which you identify those three moments and explain, in plain language, why passive was the right call in each case.

This note is just as important as the story itself, because it demonstrates that those choices were made with intention rather than habit. The difference between a passive construction that weakens prose and one that strengthens it is almost always the presence or absence of that intention.

What to Bring to the Meeting

Your completed story and your Author's Note. Be prepared to read one passage aloud — ideally one that includes a deliberate passive construction — and to walk the group through your reasoning.

Exercise 2: The Crime Scene

A Revision Exercise

The Setup

Passive voice has a particular fondness for crime scenes, bureaucratic reports, and any writing where the performer of an action is conveniently absent. Read the following passage carefully. Your job is not simply to rewrite every passive construction as active — it's to make smart, case-by-case decisions about which constructions need converting and which ones are arguably doing legitimate work.

The Passage

The store had been broken into sometime after midnight. The alarm was triggered, and the police were called. A number of windows had been smashed by the intruder, and merchandise had been scattered across the floor. A trail of muddy boot prints was left running along the back corridor toward the fire exit. Marcus, the shop's owner, was informed of the break-in by his employee, Jess, who had arrived first that morning. He was devastated. His grandfather's watch, which had been kept in the display case for years, was gone. It had been given to his grandfather by a stranger on a train in 1943, somewhere between Paris and Lyon, and had never been separated from the family since. The police report was filed. Nothing was ever found.

The Task

Work through the passage in three stages.

First, apply the Zombie Test to every sentence. Underline or mark each construction where "by zombies" could be inserted and the sentence would still hold together grammatically. This step forces you to slow down and see what's actually on the page rather than what you think is there.

Second, go through your marked constructions one by one and decide: convert it, or keep it? For each one you convert, rewrite it in active voice using the three-step method described in the article — identify the construction, read the auxiliary for tense, and promote the performer to subject. For each one you choose to keep, write a single sentence beside it explaining your reasoning. "The performer is unknown" is a valid reason. "The receiver of the action is the emotional focus" is a valid reason. "I just left it" is not.

Third, read your revised passage aloud to yourself before the meeting. Spoken prose is a reliable diagnostic. If a sentence causes you to stumble or take an odd breath, it probably still needs work. If it flows cleanly, you've likely made the right call.

What to Bring to the Meeting

Your marked-up original and your revised version, plus your written justifications for the constructions you chose to leave in passive voice. The most interesting discussion will almost certainly center on the passages where reasonable writers disagree — and this particular passage has at least two or three of those.