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The Hamilton College Writing Center presents

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS OF WRITING

The First Deadly Sin: Passive Voice

In most instances, put the verb in the active voice rather than in the passive voice. *Passive voice* produces a sentence in which the subject *receives* an action. In contrast, *active voice* produces a sentence in which the subject *performs* an action. Passive voice often produces unclear, wordy sentences, whereas active voice produces clearer, more concise sentences. To change a sentence from passive to active voice, determine who or what performs the action, and use that person or thing as the subject of the sentence.

EXAMPLES

Passive Voice: On April 19, 1775, arms were seized at Concord, precipitating the American Revolution.

Active Voice: On April 19, 1775, British soldiers seized arms at Concord, precipitating the American Revolution.

Passive Voice: Thomas Jefferson's support of the new Constitution was documented in a letter to James Madison.

Active Voice: Thomas Jefferson documented his support of the new Constitution in a letter to James Madison.

OVERUSE OF *TO BE* (A RELATED PROBLEM)

Use of forms of *to be* (e.g., *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*) leads to wordiness. Use an action verb in place of a form of *to be*.

Example: It is the combination of these two elements that makes the argument weak.

Revised: The combination of these two elements weakens the argument.

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