“To Be” Verbs and Passive Voice
What is a “to be” verb?

• A verb that is used in a number of ways in the English language, including linking, passive construction, and auxiliary
• Has many forms, including is, am, are, was, were, be, being, and been
How are they used?

• Present Tense:
  • I am/we are
  • You are
  • He, she, it is/they are

• Past Tense:
  • I was/we were
  • You were
  • He, she, it was/they were
How are they used? (cont.)

• Perfect form:
  • I, you, they, we have been

• Progressive form:
  • I am being, they are being, etc.
Linking Verbs

• “To be” verbs are used as **linking verbs** to describe the role or description of the subject. They are called this because they link the subject and the subject complement.

• Examples:
  - The cat **is** black.
  - They **are** late to the party.
  - He **was** not very happy.
  - Driving a car **is** faster than walking.
Now you try!

• Create a sentence that describes something with a linking verb.
Auxiliary verbs

• Used with progressive and progressive perfect tenses
  • Present progressive: The dog is barking.
  • Past progressive: The dog was barking.
  • Future progressive: The dog will be barking.
  • Present perfect progressive: The dog has been barking for five minutes.
  • Past perfect progressive: The dog had been barking when I got home.
  • Future perfect progressive: The dog will have been barking for 20 minutes by the time I finish this workshop!
For more information…

• See the PowerPoint on Verb Tenses on the Writing Center website.
Now you try!

• Create a sentence with a progressive tense and an auxiliary verb.
Passive Voice

• Passive voice occurs with the emphasis is placed on the object of the action rather than the subject.

• Example:
  • Active voice: The boy threw the ball.
  • Passive voice: The ball was thrown.
Why use passive voice?

• The actor is unknown:
  • The cave paintings of Lascaux were made in the Upper Old Stone Age. [We don't know who made them.]

• The actor is irrelevant:
  • An experimental solar power plant will be built in the Australian desert. [We are not interested in who is building it.]

• You want to be vague about who is responsible:
  • Mistakes were made. [Common in bureaucratic writing!]
Why use passive voice? (cont.)

- You are talking about a general truth:
  - Rules are made to be broken. [By whomever, whenever.]
- You want to emphasize the person or thing acted on. For example, it may be your main topic:
  - Insulin was first discovered in 1921 by researchers at the University of Toronto. It is still the only treatment available for diabetes.
- You are writing in a scientific genre that traditionally relies on passive voice. Passive voice is often preferred in lab reports and scientific research papers, most notably in the Materials and Methods section:
  - The sodium hydroxide was dissolved in water. This solution was then titrated with hydrochloric acid. (Corson, Tim and Rebecca Smollett)
“To Be” verbs used with passive voice

• When using to be verbs with passive voice, they are used similarly to linking and auxiliary verbs.

• Passive sentences are constructed as follows:
  • [thing receiving action] + [to be verb] + [past participle of verb] + [by] + [thing doing action] ("Active/Passive Verb Forms").
Examples

• Present progressive tense: “The sweater is being knit by the girl.”
• Simple past: “The sweater was knit by the girl.”
• Simple past, plural: “The pies were made by different people.”
Now you try!

• Create a sentence in the passive voice.
Works Cited
