



**Expansion Activities**  
Understanding and Using English Grammar, 3rd Edition  
**Chapter 11: The Passive**

**Activity: Avoiding Responsibility**

**Materials needed:** Sample authentic press release found below.

**Description:** This activity was conceived as a way for students to recognize when people or authorities are avoiding an expression of responsibility. Culturally, the passive can be used as a tool that shapes our point of view of an event or situation. This is meaning oriented and goes beyond omitting the *by*-phrase simply because the focus needs to be on what happened. As part of this activity, we can make students aware of the “political” use of the passive and how this voice is often carefully chosen to deliver a message that goes beyond the lexis of the message.

1. Show students an example of an authentic statement to the press or press release. You can find passive voice in those that are connected to a negative event, such as an illegal activity, an accident, a political mess-up.

2. Discuss the use of the passive. What is the purpose of the release? How does the speaker/writer avoid accepting blame? Why do governments, corporations, people in authority positions do this?



3. Change the passive parts in the release to active and place them side by side. Ask students, “As a reader, what feelings do you get when you read both versions? Jot down some adjectives to describe how you feel about the speaker/writer in each case.”

4. Below is an example of a press release using the passive voice. It is an excerpt of a larger release from the computer company Hewlett-Packard. The CEO was accused of illegal corporate activity, and in this excerpt from the press release, students can see her use of the passive to avoid responsibility. Interestingly, in the second paragraph, the CEO wants to point out the good things that have happened at the company under her leadership, and she uses the active voice throughout!

"The recent events that have taken place follow an important investigation that was required after the board of directors tried to find out who was persistently leaking confidential information. These leaks had the potential to affect not only the stock price of HP but also that of other publicly traded companies. Unfortunately, the investigation, which was conducted with third parties, included certain inappropriate techniques. These went beyond what we understood them to be, and I apologize that they were employed.

"I am very proud of the progress HP has made over the past 18 months. During the remainder of my tenure as chairman, I look forward to completing the transition that is underway, including expanding the board, continuing to improve our corporate governance standards and bringing the current issues to resolution."

Found online at: <http://biz.yahoo.com/bw/060912/20060912005958.html?.v=1> (The second line has been simplified from the original obtuse corporate-speak, but all other lines and all cases of the passive are exactly as in the original.)



**Expansion Activities**  
Understanding and Using English Grammar, 3rd Edition  
**Chapter 11: The Passive**

**Activity: Avoiding Responsibility**

5. Below is a fabricated press briefing that uses active voice. Students should try changing it to passive voice.
6. Ask two students to come to the front and read both versions -- section by section so the class can hear the difference.

**A Press Briefing You Will Never Hear:**

(I call this a Press Briefing because editors won't print passive voice press releases which differ from the personal statement we saw before from the CEO. Students are more likely to hear the passive in press conferences than read it in releases.)

**Earlier today, our plant manager discovered a chemical leak from one of our storage vats. The supervisor of the morning shift accidentally opened a pipe.**

**Employees released a chemical that went into the Northwoods River, and unfortunately, the chemical has contaminated the river.**

**Our experts believe\* this happened because our factory safety team had not inspected the pipes for quite some time.**

**We made a mistake. Our mistake has already killed many fish. We expect\* this error will cause many trees around the river to die also.**

**Our managers are investigating the situation further and our board of directors is discussing the situation. I will tell you more as I find it out.**

**For the moment, we advise you not to swim or fish in the river.**

\* These constructions can take the "It is + present participle" form. If your students can't come up with this on their own, you can supply it.