Active and Passive Verbs, Part I:

A verb is a word that describes an action. There are two kinds of verbs, active and passive. An active verb describes a subject “doing action” on the direct object, such as in the following sentence: Mary ate a pear. The subject (Mary) does the action of the verb (ate) on the direct object (pear). If the subject performs the action of the verb, it is an active verb.

A passive verb, while describing the same kind of subject-verb-direct object relationship, stresses the ongoing nature of the action: Mary is eating a pear. In this sentence, the subject (Mary) is currently doing the action of the verb (is eating) on the direct object (pear). Unless you mean to emphasize the ongoing nature of Mary’s action, it is better to change the verb from active to passive construction.

While writing a paper, students will find that they often use passive, instead of active verbs. Learning to watch out for and correct unnecessary passives helps improve the quality and tone of your paper.

In the following exercise, find the differences between each sentence pair. Circle the passives, and underline the actives. Decide whether sentence A or B sounds more exciting:

A) The dragon is lying down while the brave Sir Reginald is raising his spear to strike.
B) The dragon lies down while the brave Sir Reginald raises his spear to strike.

Most Exciting Sentence is ____________

Though Sentences A and B describe the same situation, changing the verb from a passive to an active makes Sentence B more exciting!

So how do you turn a passive verb into an active verb? Observe the following examples:
1. Mary is walking the dog tonight ➔ Mary walks the dog
2. Johnson and Inglebert are positing that drinking coke is causing cancer ➔ Johnson and Inglebert posit that drinking coke causes cancer.

In each case, the meaning of the new sentence remains the same as the old. However, the new sentence now contains an active verb and reads better.

In the following sentences, turn the passive verbs in the first sentence into active verbs in your second sentence.
1. Jenna is deciding whether to buy pizza from Pepe Lugado’s or Pizza Delight
2. Only by refuting Ian’s last argument can Ethan support the point he is making in this essay

See Passives and Actives Powerpoint
3. While June and Lily are building a fire, Marvin is looking for the nearest stream.

4. The dragon is shooting flames at Sir Reginald, who is lying on the ground!

Answers:

**Exercise: Most exciting sentence: Sentence A!**

1. Jenna decides whether to buy pizza from Pepe Lugado’s or Pizza Delight.
2. Only by refuting Ian’s last argument can Ethan support the point he makes in this essay.
3. While June and Lily build a fire, Marvin looks for the nearest stream.
4. The dragon shoots flames at Sir Reginald, who lies on the ground!