Passive Voice and Grammar Checkers

Many word processing programs include grammar checkers. Like other computer tools, such as the spellchecker and thesaurus, the grammar checker has both benefits and limitations. Benefits include style choices, grammar suggestions, and readability statistics. Limitations include the use of grammatical terms that many writers do not understand. For instance, grammar checkers may tell the writer that a sentence is written using a verb in the "passive voice," a term unfamiliar to many writers. All action verbs in English grammar have "voice"—either active or passive—depending on whether the subject of the verb is doing the action expressed in the verb or receiving it. If the verb is in the passive voice, the subject is receiving the action expressed in the verb. [In Microsoft Word, sentences written in passive voice are underlined in green.]

Examples:

A. Ruth decorated (active) her house.
B. The house was decorated (passive) by Ruth.

A. Kristen performed (active) the solo at the end of the dance recital.
B. The solo at the end of the dance recital was performed (passive) by Kristen.

A. Kevin fixed (active) the computer.
B. The computer was fixed (passive) by Kevin.

Generally, sentences with active verbs are preferable to those with passive voice verbs because sentences with active verbs are shorter and more direct. Passive voice verbs consist of a main verb and one or more helping verbs, so the writer needs more words to complete the sentence. Another problem is that, in some sentences with passive verbs, the subject is not stated at all.

Examples:

A. The house was decorated.
B. The solo was performed.
C. The computer was fixed.

To change a sentence with a passive voice verb to one with an active voice verb, try the following strategies:

• Locate the verb and remove the helping word.
• Locate the performer of the action and place at the beginning of the sentence (drop the preposition "by" if present in the sentence).
• If nothing in the sentence is performing the action expressed in the verb, add a subject.
• Rewrite the sentence accordingly.

The grammar checker on your word processing software may use other unfamiliar terms as well. If you need further information, consult an English handbook of grammar and usage.

Cited and adapted from
Campbell, Martha E. Focus: Writing Paragraphs and Essays. 2nd ed.