

# Rhetorical Grammar for Expository Reading and Writing

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STUDENT VERSION

MODULE 3: RACIAL PROFILING

## Passives and Modals

### Activity 1

#### Guided Composition

This activity is based on Bob Herbert, “Jim Crow Policing”

The purpose of this activity is for you to write a paragraph on the topic of this module. Your teacher will read a paragraph while you listen, and then read it again while you take notes. You will then write your own paragraph based on what you heard using your notes.

#### Noticing Language

Who is responsible for the actions in the following sentences?

1. Ethnic profiling is practiced throughout the country.
2. Not everyone who is stopped is frisked.
3. Deon Dennis was stopped and searched outside his apartment building in Harlem.
4. People are threatened with arrest for disorderly conduct if they object.

#### Rhetorical Grammar Concepts

The materials labeled Rhetorical Grammar Concepts are for your reference as you do the activities in this unit.

#### Forming the Passive

A passive verb always includes a form of **be** plus the participle of the verb.

(A participle is the *-ed* or *-en* form of the verb.)

*Examples:* **is** practiced, **was** arrested, **have been** taken

In general, only verbs that have a direct object (transitive verbs) can occur in the passive. A direct object is a noun or pronoun that names the receiver or the object of the verb’s action.

direct object

**Active:** The police **stopped** blacks and Hispanics based on their race.

The “doer” of the action in an active sentence is the subject. In a passive sentence, the “doer” is called the **agent** and is expressed in a prepositional phrase with *by*. Often the agent is omitted.

“doer” = subject

**Active:** The officer **stopped** the young man for suspicious attire.

“doer” = agent

**Passive:** The motorist **was stopped** (by the officer) for suspicious attire.

## Activity 2

### Identifying Passive Verbs

Underline the subjects and double-underline the passive verbs or verb phrases in the guided composition. Put (parentheses) around the “by” phrases that indicate the agent.

1. According to Bob Herbert, New York police officers need to be restrained from using ethnic profiling.
2. During the first three-quarters of 2009, 450,000 people in New York were stopped by the cops.
3. Blacks and Hispanics were stopped much more often than whites.
4. Contraband, usually drugs, was found in just 1.6% of the stops of blacks and 1.4% of Hispanics.
5. Weapons were found in even fewer stops.
6. People are stopped for making furtive movements or wearing “inappropriate attire for the season.”
7. People going about their daily business are menaced out of the blue by the police.
8. Lalit Carson was stopped on his lunch break from his job as a teaching assistant.
9. A class-action lawsuit has been filed against the city by The Center for Constitutional Rights. It is time to put an end to Jim Crow policing in New York City.

### Rhetorical Grammar Concepts

### Changing Active Verbs to Passive Verbs

In most cases, writers use active verbs to make clear who or what is performing the action of the sentence. Sometimes writers use passive verbs to avoid assigning responsibility, as in the phrase, “Mistakes were made but not by me.” In this sentence, we don’t know who made the mistakes.

Generally, writing that uses active verbs will be stronger and clearer. However, sometimes writers use the passive intentionally. Below are three reasons for using passive verbs.

1. Use the passive when the agent or “doer” of the action is not known, not important, is obvious, or it is not necessary to name the agent.

*Example:* John was arrested for loitering.

(The agent is obvious—when someone is arrested it is generally by the police— so the writer doesn’t choose to express the agent.)

2. Use the passive when the receiver of the action is the **subject** rather than the **agent** of the action. As a result, the focus of the sentence will be on the receiver of the action, **not the agent**.

*Example:* Many African Americans and Hispanics have been stopped simply because of their race.

(The writer has put African Americans and Hispanics in the foreground by making them the subject of the sentence. The agent is not specified, although we can infer it is the police.)

3. Use the passive to avoid the informality of using the impersonal *you* or *they*.

*Examples*

Active: You should not stop innocent people based on their race.

Passive: Innocent people should not be stopped based on their race.

### Activity 3

#### Changing Active Verbs to Passive Verbs

Rewrite the following sentences from active to passive and indicate how the focus of the sentence changes. If you include the agent in your rewrite, put the “by” phrase (in parentheses). Talk with a partner about why a writer might choose one focus instead of the other for each sentence. Always check your writing to make sure you have a good reason for using the passive.

1. In New York in 2009, law-enforcement personnel stopped black and Hispanic men simply because of their race.

*In New York, black and Hispanic men were stopped simply because of their race.*

**Active sentence focus:** *law-enforcement personnel*

**Passive sentence focus:** *black and Hispanic men*

## Rhetorical Grammar Concepts

2. In New York, the cops stopped 13 percent more people in the first nine months of 2009 than in 2008.

**Active sentence focus:**

**Passive sentence focus:**

3. The police found weapons on just 1.4 percent of Hispanics.

**Active sentence focus:**

**Passive sentence focus:**

4. The police stopped people of different races in the same proportion that they committed crimes.

**Active sentence focus:**

**Passive sentence focus:**

5. But the police should not harass individuals who have not done anything wrong.

**Active sentence focus:**

**Passive sentence focus:**

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## Modals

One special kind of verb is called a *modal*. Modals are different from helping verbs such as *have*, *do*, and *be*. Unlike those verbs, modals don't have endings like regular verbs. We say, "The policeman **has** stopped the car," but we don't say, "The policeman **cans** stop the speeding car."

Modals are a special category of verbs that are used to express ability, possibility, permission, certainty, necessity, obligation, preference, and prediction. The meaning of the modal changes the logical meaning of the main verb, so the reader must make an inference or a prediction:

- "The police officer stopped the speeding cars" is just a statement of fact. If you say, "The police officer **might** stop the speeding cars," you are suggesting that it is possible she will stop the cars, but there is also a chance she won't.
- If you say, "The police officer **should** stop the speeding cars," you are making a recommendation, but just because you believe the police officer should stop the speeding cars, it doesn't mean that she actually will.
- If you say, "The police officer **must** stop the speeding cars," you are communicating that you think it is urgent that she stop the speeding cars.

Using modals appropriately is an important way to communicate these and other shades of meaning to readers.

### Modals in Expository Writing

Modals indicate shades of meaning. If everyone agrees something is true, it can be stated as an assertion of fact, using an active verb. Writers often make claims using active verbs and then must support those claims with evidence. If a writer is unsure about the extent to which something is true, a modal can indicate that it is possible, or likely, or probable. It is an easier task to support a claim that uses a modal than a claim that makes an assertion of fact.

**Indicate possibility:** Use modals such as *may, might, can, could, are likely to*

- According to the police, these stops of innocent people **help** fight crime.  
*(To support this assertion, the police would need to provide evidence that the stops had prevented actual crimes from being committed.)*
- According to the police, the stops of innocent people **may help** fight crime.  
*(To support this assertion, the police only need to provide evidence that there was a possibility that the stops helped prevent crimes.)*

**Make a recommendation:** Use modals such as *should, must, need to, ought to, have to*

Writers often express their beliefs and opinions by using modals. Since writers of expository essays are writing to persuade their audience, they frequently use modals to make recommendations about what should happen or what they want their audience to do.

- The New York City Police Department **should be** restrained.
- The New York City Police Department **needs to be** restrained.
- The mayor of New York City **should** restrain the police department.

## Activity 4

### Identifying Modals and their Meanings

This activity is based on a student essay for the Racial Profiling module. Read the following paragraphs from a student essay about racial profiling.

Double-underline the complete verb phrases in the passage; circle the modals.

Because of their position of authority, police may use their authority to shame members of minority groups. Statistics show that a police officer is more likely to pull over a black man for speeding than a white man. When someone is judged by skin color or accent, it can be shameful and humiliating. It's not fair; it's not equal; it's not just. Police officers should protect and serve everyone, not just white people.

If people are judged daily by skin color and nationality, unity will cease to exist. How can people unite if they cannot look past the surface? Racial profiling may be the greatest cause of division among Americans. "United we stand, but divided we fall." If America cannot look past its differences, this problem could become worse. If that happens, America, the land of the great, will fall.

**Rhetorical purpose:** Why does the writer use modals for some verbs but not for others?

### Activity 5

#### Using Modals

Complete the following sentences using modals. The sentences should make sense in the context of racial profiling.

1. The New York City police department \_\_\_\_\_
2. Most Americans \_\_\_\_\_
3. Interrupting the lives of innocent people \_\_\_\_\_
4. The color of someone's skin \_\_\_\_\_
5. Fighting crime \_\_\_\_\_

### Activity 6

#### Editing Student Writing

This activity is based on a student essay for the Racial Profiling module.

**Step 1:** Revise the paragraph below to make passive verbs more precise by changing them to active form.

If you need to rewrite an entire sentence, mark the sentence with an asterisk and write your new version at the end of the paragraph.

Likely suspects have been determined by officers using racial profiling, but law enforcement has been led in the wrong direction by accepting stereotypes. After the Oklahoma City bombing, the crime was suspected to have been committed by Middle Eastern terrorists. Instead, the bomber turned out to be a white male and U.S. Army veteran who had earned a Bronze Star. He seemed like the least likely person to commit such a crime. Similarly, well-to-do John Walker Lindh was an unlikely candidate for a Taliban fighter, although he had left Marin County and traveled to Afghanistan to join the jihad. Attention from the real perpetrators of crimes is diverted by focusing on race and ethnicity, and profiling stands in the way of effective law enforcement. However, the use of profiling has actually grown since September 11th. According to Amnesty International, the human rights organization, not only are human rights violated by the practice of profiling by race, religion, and national origin, but it is also counterproductive.

**Step 2:** Now read your new version, and revise using modals to qualify assertions where appropriate.

## Activity 7

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### Editing Your Guided Composition

Return to your guided composition from Activity 1.

- Revise assertions in your guided composition using modals to make them more defensible and make passive verbs more precise by changing them to active form. Remember you may choose to leave some assertions in the active tense and some passive verbs, as long as they serve a clear purpose.
- Put a question mark in the margin next to any sentences that you are unsure about.
- Exchange your paragraph with a partner, and discuss any questions you have. Check with your teacher if you cannot agree on an answer.

## Activity 8

### Editing Your Own Writing

Select a paragraph from your writing assignment for Racial Profiling.

- Revise assertions in the paragraph using modals to make them more defensible and make passive verbs more precise by changing them to active form. Remember you may choose to leave some assertions in the active tense and some passive verbs, as long as they serve a clear purpose.
- Put a question mark in the margin next to any sentences that you are unsure about.
- Exchange your paragraph with a partner and discuss any questions you have. Check with your teacher if you cannot agree on an answer.
- Now edit the rest of your essay by revising assertions that are too general and making passive verbs more precise by changing them to active form.