

Active and Passive Voice

Active Voice

In sentences written in active voice, the subject performs the action expressed in the verb; the subject acts.

The dog <i>bit</i> the boy.
Pooja <i>will present</i> her research at the conference.
Scientists <i>have conducted</i> experiments to test the hypothesis.
Watching a framed, mobile world through a car's windshield <i>reminds</i> me of watching a movie or TV.

In each example above, the subject of the sentence performs the action expressed in the verb.

Passive Voice

In sentences written in passive voice, the subject receives the action expressed in the verb; the subject is acted upon. The agent performing the action may appear in a "by the . . ." phrase or may be omitted.

The boy <i>was bitten</i> by the dog.
Research <i>will be presented</i> by Pooja at the conference.
Experiments <i>have been conducted</i> to test the hypothesis. (agent performing action has been omitted.)
I am reminded of watching a movie or TV by watching a framed, mobile world through a car's windshield.

Sometimes the use of passive voice can create awkward sentences, as in the last example above. An overuse of passive voice throughout an essay can cause your prose to seem flat and uninteresting. In scientific writing, however, passive voice is more readily accepted since using it allows one to write without using personal pronouns or the names of particular researchers as the subjects of sentences (see the third example above). This practice helps to create the appearance of an objective, fact-based discourse because writers can present research and conclusions without attributing them to particular agents. Instead, the writing appears to convey information that is not limited or biased by individual perspectives or personal interests.

You can recognize passive-voice expressions because the verb phrase will always include a form of *be* such as *am*, *is*, *was*, *were*, *are*, or *been*. The presence of a *be*-verb, however, does not necessarily mean that the sentence is in passive voice. Another way to recognize passive-voice sentences is that they include a "by the..." phrase after the verb; the agent performing the action, if named, is the object of the preposition in this phrase.

Choosing Active Voice

In most nonscientific writing situations, active voice is preferable to passive for the majority of your sentences. Even in scientific writing, overuse of passive voice or use of passive voice in long and complicated sentences can cause readers to lose interest or to become confused. Sentences in active voice are generally -- though not always -- clearer and more direct than those in passive voice.

passive (indirect)	active (direct):
The entrance exam <i>was failed</i> by over one-third of the applicants to the school.	Over one-third of the applicants to the school <i>failed</i> the entrance exam.
The brakes <i>were slammed on</i> by her as the car sped downhill.	She <i>slammed on</i> the brakes as the car sped downhill.
Your bicycle <i>has been damaged</i> . (agent omitted)	I <i>have damaged</i> your bicycle.

Sentences in active voice are also more concise than those in passive voice because fewer words are required to express action in active voice than in passive.

passive (more wordy)	active (more concise)
Action on the bill <i>is being considered</i> by the committee.	The committee <i>is considering</i> action on the bill.

By then, the soundtrack <i>will have been completely remixed</i> by the sound engineers .	By then, the sound engineers <i>will have completely remixed</i> the soundtrack .
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Changing passive to active

If you want to change a passive-voice sentence to active voice, find the agent in a "by the..." phrase consider carefully who or what is performing the action expressed in the verb. Make that agent the subject of the sentence, and change the verb accordingly. Sometimes you will need to infer the agent from the surrounding sentences which provide context.

Passive Voice	Agent	Changed to Active Voice
The book <i>is being read</i> by most of the class .	most of the class	Most of the class <i>is reading</i> the book .
Results <i>will be published</i> in the next issue of the journal . by ?	agent not specified; most likely agents such as "the researchers"	The researchers <i>will publish</i> their results <i>in the next issue of the journal</i> .
A policy of whitewashing and cover-up <i>has been pursued</i> by the CIA director and his close advisors .	the CIA director and his close advisors	The CIA director and his close advisors <i>have pursued</i> a policy of whitewashing and cover-up .
Mistakes <i>were made</i> . by ?	agent not specified; most likely agents such as "we"	We <i>made</i> mistakes .

Choosing Passive Voice

While active voice helps to create clear and direct sentences, sometimes writers find that using an indirect expression is rhetorically effective in a given situation, so they choose passive voice. Also, as mentioned above, writers in the sciences conventionally use passive voice more often than writers in other discourses. Passive voice makes sense when the agent performing the action is obvious, unimportant, or unknown or when a writer wishes to postpone mentioning the agent until the last part of the sentence or to avoid mentioning the agent at all. The passive voice is effective in such circumstances because it highlights the action and what is acted upon rather than the agent performing the action.

active	passive
The dispatcher <i>is notifying</i> police that three prisoners have escaped.	Police <i>are being notified</i> that three prisoners have escaped.

Surgeons successfully <i>performed</i> a new experimental liver-transplant operation yesterday.	A new experimental liver-transplant operation <i>was performed</i> successfully yesterday.
"Authorities <i>make</i> rules to be broken," he said defiantly.	"Rules <i>are made</i> to be broken," he said defiantly.

In each of these examples, the passive voice makes sense because the agent is relatively unimportant compared to the action itself and what is acted upon.

Changing active to passive

If you want to change an active-voice sentence to passive voice, consider carefully who or what is performing the action expressed in the verb, and then make that agent the object of a "by the..." phrase. Make what is acted upon the subject of the sentence, and change the verb to a form of *be* + past participle. Including an explicit "by the..." phrase is optional.

Active Voice	Agent	Changed to Passive Voice
The presiding officer <i>vetoed</i> the committee's recommendation.	The presiding officer	The committee's recommendation <i>was vetoed</i> by the presiding officer.
The leaders <i>are seeking</i> a fair resolution to the crisis.	The leaders	A fair resolution to the crisis <i>is being sought</i> . (by the leaders)
Scientists <i>have discovered</i> traces of ice on the surface of Mars.	The scientists	Traces of ice <i>have been discovered</i> on the surface of Mars. (by scientists)

In each of these examples, the passive voice is useful for highlighting the action and what is acted upon instead of the agent.

Some suggestions

1. Avoid starting a sentence in active voice and then shifting to passive.

Unnecessary shift in voice	Revised
Many customers in the restaurant <i>found</i> the coffee too bitter to drink, but it <i>was still ordered</i> frequently.	Many customers in the restaurant <i>found</i> the coffee too bitter to drink, but they still <i>ordered</i> it frequently.
He <i>tried</i> to act cool when he slipped in the puddle, but he <i>was still laughed at</i> by the other students.	He <i>tried</i> to act cool when he slipped in the puddle, but other students still <i>laughed at</i> him.

2. Avoid dangling modifiers caused by the use of passive voice. A dangling modifier is a word or phrase that modifies a word not clearly stated in the sentence. (See also our handout on dangling modifiers http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/grammar/g_dangmod.html.)

Dangling modifier with passive voice	Revised
To save time, the paper <i>was written</i> on a computer. (Who was saving time? The paper?)	To save time, Kristin <i>wrote</i> the paper on a computer.
Seeking to lay off workers without taking the blame, consultants <i>were hired</i> to break the bad news. (Who was seeking to lay off workers? The consultants?)	Seeking to lay off workers without taking the blame, CEO <i>hired</i> consultants to break the bad news.

3. Don't trust the grammar-checking programs in word-processing software. Many grammar checkers flag all passive constructions, but you may want to keep some that are flagged. Trust your judgement or ask another human being for their opinion about which sentence sounds best.

