

The relationship between verbs and nouns in writing indicates what is important in each sentence. Active voice prioritizes the subject, and passive voice prioritizes the action. In most cases, active voice is preferred to passive voice, but always refer to assignment guidelines and common practices in your field of study.

Active Voice

Most writing assignments encourage the use of active voice because it is clearer and shows the reader who is taking action in the sentence. In sentences with active voice, the subject performs the action (verb), and the object receives the action.

Example: Shakespeare (subject) wrote (verb) plays (object) for the Globe Theatre.

Example: The author (subject) published (verb) the article (object).

Passive Voice

Although active voice is usually preferred, there may be some cases where passive voice is most effective. Passive voice emphasizes the object or receiver of the action over the subject or performer of the action.

Example: The plays (object) were written (verb) by Shakespeare (subject).

Passive voice can also be used the subject is unknown or unimportant to the purpose of the sentence.

Example: The article (object) was published (verb).

Transforming Passive Sentences into Active Sentences

To change passive voice to active voice, move the subject to the beginning of the sentence and use a verb to connect it to the object.

Passive: The ice cream cones were **eaten by** the children

Active: The children **ate** the ice cream cones.

Further Suggestions

If the original sentence contains a modifying phrase or a phrase that describes the subject or object, keep the phrase next to that element when changing from active to passive voice. If the phrase is placed in the wrong spot, the sentence may be unclear.

Example: The ice cream cones from the store were eaten by the children.

Incorrect: The children from the store ate the ice cream cones. (“from the store” describes the children)

Correct: The children ate the ice cream cones from the store. (“from the store” describes the ice cream)

Avoid shifting from active to passive voice because it can create confusion and awkwardness.

Incorrect: The children ate the ice cream, but it was bought by Peter. (voice shifts—active to passive)

Correct: The children ate the ice cream, but Peter bought it. (voice is consistent—active to active)

The verb in passive voice takes a form of the verb “to be” and the past participle of the main verb. “Be” verbs include: be, am, is, are, was, were, been, being. Make the subject perform the verb following these steps:

- Make the performer of the action in the “by” phrase **the subject** of the active sentence. Eliminate the word “by” if necessary.
- **Change the verb** from a “to be” form to the appropriate active tense.
- Make **the subject** of the passive sentence **the object** of the active sentence.