

Active vs. Passive Voice

Note: This document should only be used as a reference and should not replace assignment guidelines.

The voice in a sentence tells the reader whether the subject performs or receives the verb's action.

Active Voice

In sentences with active voice, the subject performs the action and the receiver takes the action of the verb.

EXAMPLE: Molly (**agent/subject**) cashed (**verb**) her check (**receiver**) at the bank.

Passive Voice

In sentences with passive voice, the subject is acted upon by the verb. This means the agent of the sentence comes after the verb. The verb in passive voice takes a form of the verb "to be" and the past participle of the main verb. "Be" Verbs: be, am, is, are, was, were, been, being

EXAMPLES: The check (**receiver/subject**) was cashed (**verb**) by Molly (**agent**) at the bank.
The check (**receiver/subject**) was cashed (**verb**) at the bank. (**no agent**)

Choosing between Active and Passive Voice

Choosing Active Voice

Use active voice in most writing because it engages the reader more effectively than passive voice.

- Active voice is direct.

ACTIVE: John **asked** Teresa to dinner.

PASSIVE: Teresa **was asked** to dinner by John.

- Verbs in the active voice are more lively because they emphasize the agent of the action.

ACTIVE: The batter **strikes** the ball with the bat.

PASSIVE: The ball **is struck** by the batter with the bat.

Choosing Passive Voice

In general, use passive voice sparingly. However, passive voice may be used in the following cases:

- When emphasizing the receiver is more important than emphasizing the agent of the action.

PASSIVE: The president **was elected** three years ago.

ACTIVE: Voters **elected** the president three years ago.

Passive voice is more effective because the president being elected is the most important part of this sentence, rather than the voters casting their votes.

- When the agent is unknown.

PASSIVE: The money **was stolen** last night.

ACTIVE: Someone **stole** the money last night.

The passive is more effective because it emphasizes the action of the money being stolen rather than focusing on the unknown agent.

- When your discipline wants writing to appear objective and fact-based. Scientists and business writing often use passive voice.

PASSIVE: The check **was mailed** late.

ACTIVE: I **mailed** the check late.

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Passive voice is more effective because it keeps the sentence from sounding personal or accusatory. The important part of the sentence is that the check was mailed late, not who mailed it.

Transforming Passive Sentences into Active Sentences

You can transform passive voice to active voice by making the agent perform the verb. The following steps show how to transform a sentence.

EXAMPLE: The ice cream cones (**receiver/subject**) were eaten (**verb**) by the children (**agent**).

Step Number One:

Make the agent in the *by* phrase the subject of the active sentence. Eliminate the word *by* if necessary.

PASSIVE	ACTIVE
The ice cream cones were eaten by the children .	The children ...

Step Number Two:

Change the verb from a “to be” form to the appropriate active tense.

PASSIVE	ACTIVE
The ice cream cones were eaten by the children.	The children ate ...

Step Number Three:

Make the subject of the passive sentence the receiver of the active sentence.

PASSIVE	ACTIVE
The ice cream cones were eaten by the children.	The children ate the ice cream .

Transforming Active Sentences into Passive Sentences

You can change active voice sentences into passive voice by reversing the steps listed above.

- Make the receiver of the active sentence the subject of the passive sentence.
- Transform the verb into a form of *to be* plus the past participle of the main verb.
- Put the subject/agent of the active sentence into a *by* phrase or omit it.

A Few Cautions

- If your original sentence contains a modifying phrase or a phrase that describes a specific element in the sentence, make sure you keep the phrase next to that element when you change from active to passive voice. If the phrase is left 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. (describes *the children*)

CORRECT: The children ate the ice cream cones **from the store**. (describes *ice cream cones*)

- Avoid shifting from active to passive voice in the same sentence because it can cause awkwardness and confusion.

INCORRECT: The children **ate** the ice cream, but it **was bought** by Peter. (voice shifts)

CORRECT: The children **ate** the ice cream, but Peter **bought** it. (voice is consistent)

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