

Passive and Active Voice

Active Voice

In active voice, the subject of the sentence **performs the action** expressed by the verb. Many writers prefer active voice, because it expresses confidence in writing. In the following sentences, notice how the subject performs the action of the verb, which makes the sentences direct, clear, and easy to understand:

Tom **wrote** the paper.

The committee **is considering** the petition for vegan meal options.

Henry **slammed** on the brakes at the red light.

Passive Voice

In passive voice, the subject of the sentence **receives the action** of the verb, making the subject **passive** instead of active. The agent performing the action may appear in a "by..." phrase, or may not appear at all. The verb is always usually preceded by some form of "be" (is, are, was, were, etc.):

The paper **was written** by Tom.

The subject here is the paper instead of Tom. The subject (the paper) is acted upon (was written) by someone or something (Tom).

The petition for vegan meal options **is being considered**.

The subject here is the petition, and the agent of the action (presumably a committee) is completely omitted.

The brakes **were slammed upon** at the red light by Henry.

The agent of this action appears at the end of the sentence, making it clunky and awkward.

Reasons to Avoid Passive Voice

- Passive voice can obscure the meaning of sentences.
- Excessive use of passive voice can make your writing seem dry, boring, and uncertain.
- Passive voice can also result in vague or deceptive writing, such as in the following sentence: *Mistakes were made*. (*Who* made the mistakes? Unless you are the person who made the mistakes and are evading blame, there is no reason to use passive voice in this sentence.)
- Passive voice sometimes indicates a lack of careful thought. *Women have always been oppressed*. (By whom? Their mothers? Capitalism? The institution of marriage?)



Reasons to Use Passive Voice

Passive voice is used sometimes in scientific writing to draw attention to processes and results, instead of the individual researcher.

Passive voice sometimes makes more sense than active voice if the agent performing the action is unimportant, obvious, or unknown, or if the writer wants to avoid mentioning the agent altogether. Occasionally, writers choose to use passive voice for rhetorical effect. This is useful if you want the emphasis to be on the action or the thing acted upon rather than the agent.

Passive: *Cakes* **are made** to be delicious, not healthy.

Active: *Cooks* **make** cakes to be delicious, not healthy.

In a paragraph emphasizing cakes and not cooks, the passive voice is preferable because it is both understood and not important that cooks make cakes. The active voice puts unnecessary emphasis on the cook, when what is really important is the cake.

Switching from Passive to Active Voice

When you want to make passive voice active, locate the agent performing the action, usually in a prepositional phrase starting with "by," make that your subject, and change your verb accordingly.

Example: The jacket was returned by Bruce.

Fixed: Bruce returned the jacket.

In cases where the agent is omitted, you may have to identify the agent.

Example: The results will be presented at the conference.

Fixed: The researchers will present the results at the conference.