

Active and Passive Voice

WHAT IS A WRITING VOICE?

Verb forms in English have two “voices,” either active or passive. They are defined by how they are used in relation to the subject, so the sentences in which they function can also be classified as active or passive. The basic difference between them is that in the active voice, the subject of the sentence is the *agent*, or performer, of the action. In the passive voice, the subject is having an action done to it; it is being acted on. The two voices are not to be confused with the *tense* of a verb. Active voice doesn’t indicate present tense any more than passive relates to the past. Both types of verb/sentence voices can be constructed in *any* verb tense.

For example:

- **The game was played on Sunday. (*active voice*)**
- **On Sunday, the game was being played. (*passive voice*)**

Both of these sentences are in the past tense, but the first is in the active voice because the subject “the game” is the agent of the action; the game “was played.” In the second sentence, the “game” is the receiver of the action “was being played.” In this example, the agent is unnamed, but there is an implied “by the...” performer of the action, which could be specified as “the players” or “the team,” etc.

The ability to distinguish between the two voices means that unnecessary shifts in voice can be avoided. This is important within paragraphs, but especially within individual sentences.

For example:

- **We went to the concert, and our favorite songs were being played by the second band.**

In this sentence, the first clause is in the active voice, but the second one shifts into passive. For the sake of clarity and uniformity, a better way to make the same statement using the active voice is:

- **We went to the concert, and the second band played our favorite songs.**

The Active Voice

In most writing, the emphasis should ideally be on using the active voice. Generally, the active voice makes a stronger and more direct statement than the passive voice, and almost always does so using fewer words. It is also the clearer, more vivid choice in the great majority of instances. For these reasons, especially in narrative writing when describing action, use of the active voice is obviously preferable. However, it is also best for use in almost any type of descriptive, declarative sentence that is non-scientific. The passive voice is equally correct and grammatical, but typically less effective overall in conveying a simple image or a key idea, except in specific situations (described under Passive Voice). The following are some examples of sentences written in the passive voice that would flow better in the active voice:

- **The Writing Proficiency Exam was failed by a small percentage of students this semester. (*passive*)**
- **A small percentage of students failed the Writing Proficiency Exam this semester. (*active—more direct*)**

- **The student was lectured by him for not coming to class prepared.** (*passive—awkward*)
- **He lectured the student for not coming to class prepared.** (*active—stronger*)

- **A better plan is being implemented.** (*passive—vague*)
- **Joe is implementing a better plan.** (*active—inclusion of agent*)

- **My interest in learning will always be pursued by me.** (*passive—not concise*)
- **I will always pursue my interest in learning.** (*active*)

The Passive Voice

In some cases, the passive voice makes a useful alternative to a strict adherence to active voice only, and is sometimes even more appropriate. In any kind of scientific writing, for example, passive voice helps to avoid the use of personal pronouns and gives writing a more objective, informational tone.

Other valid uses of the passive voice are: 1. when the subject is unspecified because it isn't known; 2. when the subject is unimportant or deliberately de-emphasized; 3. if the emphasis is meant to be on the receiver of the action; and 4. if the writing is consistent overall and a rare statement in passive voice seems to flow better for the sake of variety.

Remember that the passive voice always uses some tense of the verb “to be” in conjunction with the corresponding past participle. A passive sentence construction also contains (or implies) the phrase “by the...” Here are a few examples of effective sentences in the passive voice:

- **My car was broken into over the weekend.** (*performer of action is unknown/unspecified*)
- **An announcement was made over the P.A. system to evacuate the building because of smoke on the third floor.** (*performer of the action is unimportant/not emphasized*)
- **The best soufflé I have ever tasted is being prepared by the chef.** (*emphasis on the receiver of “being prepared” action*)

One potential pitfall of the passive voice is the risk of unintended dangling modifiers. This happens when it is unclear which word in the sentence (or implied by context) is being modified by another particular word or phrase, as in these examples:

- **Walking down Main Street, an accident was witnessed.**
(By whom? It sounds as if the accident itself was seen walking down Main Street.)
- **Correction: Walking down Main Street, Julie witnessed an accident.**

- **Racing to get away, her purse was spilled.**
(Whose? This seems to be saying that her purse sprouted legs and tried to quickly flee.)
- **Correction: Racing to get away, Jen spilled her purse.**

- **Keeping quietly occupied, cell phones were used to exchange funny text messages.**
(By whom? The cell phones themselves seem to be texting each other spontaneously.)
- **Correction: Keeping quietly occupied, the bored students used cell phones to exchange funny text messages.**

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