

Active and Passive Voice

What is an active sentence?

An active sentence is a sentence that has a subject + verb + object. Active voice informs the reader about what the subject does—in other words, the subject is performing the verb. The verb will occur early in the sentence.

Subject	Verb	Object
↓	↓	↓

Active: Pat reviews my papers.

When to use an active sentence?

- When you want a sentence that is clear and direct.

What is a passive sentence?

A passive sentence takes no object. In a passive sentence the subject is acted upon. The verb will occur later in the sentence.

Passive: My papers are reviewed by Pat.

When to use a passive sentence?

- When it is not important to know the subject.
- When the subject is unknown.
- In scientific writing, passive voice allows the writer to avoid using personal pronouns or researchers' names. Using passive voice helps distance the subject from the results, which can help keep focus and maintain objectivity.

Verb (or "action")



Passive: Organic chemistry experiments were **performed** in the new lab.

Active: Students **performed** organic chemistry experiments in the new lab.

Recognizing passive sentences

Passive sentences contain a form of the verb *to be* (e.g., am, is, was, were, are, been). The form of *to be* is then followed by an action verb in past tense (e.g., "was conducted"). The subject performing the action comes after the verb and is introduced with *by* or is omitted.

Passive: Coffee is grown in Brazil.

In this sentence, what is important is that "coffee is grown in Brazil" and not who grows the coffee. The *by*-phrase is important *if* the reader wants to know the doer of the action.

Passive: Coffee is grown in Brazil by farmers.

Active: Farmers grow coffee in Brazil.

Avoid switching from active to passive voice—keep voice consistent

(verbs in bold)

	Active	Passive
Shift in voice:	The instructor discussed a wide range of topics.	In addition, <u>opportunities for research were provided.</u>

Consistent voice: The instructor **discussed** a wide range of topics and **provided** opportunities for research.

Changing from passive to active voice

To change sentences from passive to active voice, place the subject in front of the action.

Passive: *Hamlet* was written by Shakespeare.

Active: Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*.

Passive: The book is being read by most of the class.

Active: Most of the class is reading the book.

Passive: Experiments have been conducted to test the hypothesis.

Active: Researchers tested the hypothesis by conducting experiments.

Passive: Action on the bill is being considered by the committee.

Active: The committee is considering action on the bill.

Passive: The students were asked by the professor whether they understood the ethical dilemma.

Active: The professor asked the students whether they understood the ethical dilemma.

Just for fun: You might be wondering what to do if the sentence has no obvious subject. One way to check if a sentence is passive is to add “by zombies” to the end. If the sentence still makes sense, it likely has passive construction.

Passive: The sentence was written. (by zombies)

Active: Zombies wrote the sentence.