

Passive and Active Voice

In sentences written in **active voice**, the subject clearly performs the action expressed in the verb.

Example: The chef prepared the meal.

[*chef* is the subject of the sentence and does the action of *preparing* the meal]

In sentences written in **passive voice**, the subject receives the action expressed in the verb; the subject is acted upon. The agent actually performing the action may appear in a "by the . . ." phrase or may be omitted.

Example: The meal was prepared by the chef.

[*meal* is the subject of the sentence but it is not performing an action. It is instead being acted upon by being *prepared*. The *chef* is the agent of the sentence but appears in a "by the..." phrase].

Why use Active Voice?

Active voice is preferable to passive for most of your sentences, especially in academic writing. Overuse of passive voice in long and complex sentences can cause boredom and confusion in readers. Sentences in active voice are generally clearer and more direct and concise than those in passive voice.

Examples

passive (indirect):	active (direct):
The Economics test was failed by Robert.	Robert failed his Economics test.
The documents have been photocopied. (By whom? The agent is omitted.)	My assistant photocopied the documents.
Significant advances in laser technology have been made by the research team.	The research team has made significant advances in laser technology.

Recognizing Passive Voice:

- In a passive-voice sentence, the verb phrase will always include a form of the verb *to be*, such as **am, is, was, were, are, or been**
- Another way to recognize passive-voice sentences is that they may include a "**by the...**" phrase after the verb

Changing passive-voice to active voice:

- Find the agent in a "by the..." phrase, or consider carefully who or what is performing the action expressed in the verb.
- Make that agent the subject of the sentence (generally appears towards the beginning of the sentence), and change the verb accordingly (occasionally, when the performer is not clear, you will need to guess who or what it is based on the context provided by the surrounding sentences).

Examples

Passive Voice	Agent	Changed to Active Voice
The movie is being watched by a teen audience.	A teen audience	A teen audience is watching the movie.
Stories concerning haunted houses have been recently published in <i>Redbook</i> magazine.	<i>Redbook</i> magazine	<i>Redbook</i> magazine recently published stories concerning haunted houses.
The tap dance will have been choreographed by the dancers by next Tuesday.	The dancers	The dancers will choreograph their tap dance by next Tuesday.
Lies were told to the public.	agent not specified; most likely an agent such as "we" or "they"	We told lies to the public.

The following resources was consulted in creating this document:

Purdue University Online Writing Lab. "Active and Passive Voice" 2009.
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/539/01/>

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The College of Saint Rose Writing Center, 2006, updated 2009