
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. **An active voice is associated with writing that is clear and direct** and should be used for most non-scientific academic writing.

Subject Verb Object

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Active: Pat reviews my papers.

Why use an active sentence?

- When it is important to know who the subject is or what the subject does.

What is a passive sentence?

A passive sentence takes no object. In a passive sentence the subject is acted upon.

Passive: My papers are reviewed by Pat.

Why use a passive sentence?

- When it is not important to know the subject.
- When the subject performing the action is obvious.
- When the subject is unknown.
- In scientific writing, as passive voice allows the writer to avoid using personal pronouns or researchers' names. Using passive voice helps support the appearance of an objective, fact-based paper.

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

Active Passive

Shift in voice: The instructor discussed a wide range of topics. In addition, opportunities for research were provided.

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.