

Active vs. Passive Voice

Note: This document should only be used as a reference and should not replace assignment guidelines.

The voice in a sentence tells the reader whether the subject performs or receives the verb's action.

Active Voice

In sentences with active voice, the subject performs the action and the receiver takes the action of the verb.

EXAMPLE: Molly (**agent**) cashed (**verb**) her check (**receiver**) at the bank.

Passive Voice

In passive sentences, the receiver of the verb's action becomes the subject of the sentence. The verb in passive voice takes a form of the verb "to be" and the past participle of the main verb.

EXAMPLES: The check (**receiver**) was cashed (**verb**) by Molly (**agent**) at the bank.
The check (**receiver**) was cashed (**verb**) at the bank. (**no agent**)

Choosing between Active and Passive Voice

Choosing Active Voice

Use active voice in most writing because it engages the reader more effectively than passive voice.

- Active voice is direct.

ACTIVE: John **asked** Teresa to dinner.

PASSIVE: Teresa **was asked** to dinner by John.

- Verbs in the active voice are more lively because they emphasize the agent of the action.

ACTIVE: The batter **strikes** the ball with the bat.

PASSIVE: The ball **is struck** by the batter with the bat.

Choosing Passive Voice

In general, use passive voice sparingly. However, passive voice may be used in the following cases:

- When emphasizing the receiver is more important than emphasizing the agent of the action

PASSIVE: The president **was elected** three years ago.

ACTIVE: Voters **elected** the president three years ago.

- When the agent is unknown

PASSIVE: The money **was stolen** last night.

ACTIVE: Someone **stole** the money last night.

- When your discipline wants writing appear objective and fact-based. Scientists and business writing often use passive voice.

PASSIVE: The check **was mailed** late.

ACTIVE: I **mailed** the check late.

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Transforming Passive Sentences into Active Sentences

You can transform passive voice to active voice by making the agent perform the verb. The following steps show how to transform a sentence.

EXAMPLE: The ice cream cones (**receiver**) were eaten (**verb**) by the children (**agent**).

Step Number One:

Make the agent in the *by* phrase the subject of the active sentence. Eliminate the word *by* if necessary.

PASSIVE	ACTIVE
The ice cream cones were eaten by the children .	The children ...

Step Number Two:

Change the verb from a “to be” form to the appropriate active tense.

PASSIVE	ACTIVE
The ice cream cones were eaten by the children.	The children ate ...

Step Number Three:

Make the subject of the passive sentence the receiver of the active sentence.

PASSIVE	ACTIVE
The ice cream cones were eaten by the children.	The children ate the ice cream .

Transforming Active Sentences into Passive Sentences

You can change active voice sentences into passive voice by reversing the steps listed above.

- Make the receiver of the active sentence the subject of the passive voice sentence.
- Transform the verb into a form of *to be* plus the past participle of the main verb.
- Put the subject/agent of the active sentence into a *by* phrase or omit it.

A Few Cautions

- If your original sentence contains a modifying phrase or a phrase that describes a specific element in the sentence, make sure you keep the phrase next to that element when you change from active to passive voice. If the phrase is left in the wrong spot, the sentence may be unclear.

EXAMPLE: The ice cream cones **from the store** were eaten by the children.

INCORRECT: The children **from the store** ate the ice cream cones. (describes *the children*)

CORRECT: The children ate the ice cream cones **from the store**. (describes *ice cream cones*)

- Avoid shifting from active to passive voice in the same sentence because it can cause awkwardness and confusion.

INCORRECT: The children **ate** the ice cream, but it **was bought** by Peter. (voice shifts)

CORRECT: The children **ate** the ice cream, but Peter **bought** it. (voice is consistent)