

Active and Passive Voice



Learning about active and passive voice allows a writer to know when the use of each voice is most appropriate or effective. It may also help a writer clarify meaning or emphasize information. This handout will introduce the basics of active and passive voice, but writers should always tailor their work to the appropriate audience, assignment, and discipline.

Active Voice

In sentences written in active voice, **the subject performs the action of the verb**. Active constructions are clear because they identify the subject. Active voice often uses fewer words than passive voice.

Example: The **girl** walked the dog. (The subject *girl* does the acting; *she* walked the dog.)

Passive Voice

In the passive voice, **the subject receives the action or is acted upon**. The verb's action is performed by something other than the subject. *To be* verbs (e.g., is, was, were) often indicate the use of passive voice.

Example: The tree **was climbed** by the cat. (The subject *tree* is acted upon by the cat; the tree was climbed.)

The person performing a specific action might not be mentioned.

Example: Plans **were made** quickly. (The subject *plans* is acted upon; the plan-makers are **not** mentioned.)

Converting from Passive to Active Voice

Converting from passive to active voice puts the emphasis on the subject. Moving the subject to the beginning of the sentence provides more clarity and helps orient the reader.

Passive: Trees are often climbed **by little children**.

Active: **Little children** often climb trees.

Suggestions for converting from passive to active voice:

1. Determine the purpose and desired effect(s) of the sentence
2. Find the main action (verb) of the sentence
3. Determine whether the one doing the main action (subject) is present
4. Rewrite the sentence so the subject comes before the verb (actor before action), making sure the subject is performing the action, not receiving the action

Appropriate Use of Passive Voice

Although the passive voice should be avoided when it unnecessarily obscures the subject, it is sometimes appropriate. For example, scientific writing often uses the passive voice to relate data because the researcher is not as important as the findings. Passive voice may also be used when the subject is unknown or unnecessary:

Example: The lock was broken this morning. (Subject unknown.)

Example: Oxygen was discovered by Joseph Priestley in 1774. (Emphasis is on what was done.)