



Active and Passive Voice

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What Exactly Are Active and Passive Voice, Anyway?

If you feel silly that you don't know the answer to this question, I would estimate that about 70% of the people I teach don't know the answer either. Active and passive voice describe the order of information in a sentence and what is being focused on, the subject of the action, the action itself, or the receiver of the action.

In most cases, a thought can be expressed both in the active and the passive voice. In some lines of work, active voice is encouraged. In other lines of work, passive voice is encouraged.

IMPORTANT:
Passive voice is not the same as past tense.
This is a very common error.

So let's get these two figured out.

Active Voice

Active voice means that the subject or “actor” of the sentence is performing the action of the sentence. The actor will generally appear very early in the sentence.

If you think back to stories you were told as a child, they were written in active voice

Examples of Active Voice:

- **The cow** jumped over the moon. (actor = the cow)
- And **they all** lived happily ever after. (actors = they)
- **Mary** had a little lamb. (actor = Mary)
- **My brother** broke the window. (actor = my brother)
- **The bouncer** threw the drunken patron out of the (actor = the bouncer)



“You’d better take this bullet- I think I’m all out of unconditional love.”

Active Voice

Active voice is generally encouraged because readers clearly can see who or what is doing the action. Also, active voice is a bit more concise than passive voice.

For example, if you are providing eye-witness testimony to an accident and you are speaking to a police officer, you want to focus on what **you** saw and experienced personally.

I saw...
I called...
I helped...



Passive Voice

On the other hand, passive voice focuses not on *who* is doing the action but on **the action itself**. In some cases, the focus is on the **recipient of the action**. Notice how in the following examples, the “actor” that was at the beginning of the active voice sentences is now at end of the passive voice sentences:

- **Active Voice:** **The cow** jumped over the moon.
- **Passive Voice:** The moon was jumped over by **the cow**.

- **Active Voice:** And **they all** lived happily ever after.
- **Passive Voice:** Life was lived happily by **all of them**.

- **Active Voice:** **Mary** had a little lamb.
- **Passive Voice:** A little lamb was owned by **Mary**.

- **Active Voice:** **My brother** broke the window.
- **Passive Voice:** The window was broken by **my brother**.

- **Active Voice:** **The bouncer** threw the drunken patron out of the restaurant .
- **Passive Voice:** The drunken patron was thrown out of the restaurant by **the bouncer**.

A good clue you have passive voice: the phrase “by _____” is at the end of the sentence (by the cow, by all of them, by Mary, by my brother, my the bouncer.)

Passive Voice

In some cases, readers are never told who actually performed the action at all.
Let's rewrite these examples one more time:

- The moon was jumped over. (by whom?)
- Life was lived happily. (by whom?)
- A little lamb was owned. (by whom?)
- The window was broken. (by whom?)
- The drunken patron was thrown out of the restaurant. (by whom?)

How about this one:

- The toddler was left unattended with a bunch of Crayola markers. (by whom?)*

**Seriously – who did this?*



Passive Voice

It is appropriate, and even customary, to use the passive voice when the performer of the action is less important than the action and/or the recipient of the action. For example, in many types of scientific writing, passive voice is widely used:

- “Twenty-five milliliters of hydrochloric acid were poured into the beaker **by the scientist**” or “Twenty-five milliliters of hydrochloric acid were poured into the beaker.”
- Notice we don’t write, “**The scientist poured** twenty-five milliliters of hydrochloric acid into the beaker.”
- In this case, readers don’t really care about who did the action in the experiment; the focus is on the action itself.

Passive Voice

Sometimes, passive voice is used to obscure who is responsible for the action being described, and this can, on occasion, be unethical:

- The window was broken. (by whom?) Is it ethical to leave the actor out when the actor is known, such as in “The window was broken by my brother”? Or better yet, “My brother broke the window”?
- Mistakes were made. (by whom?) Is it ethical to leave the actor out when the actor is known, such as in “Mistakes were made by Angela when she gave the dog a tube of dark purple lipstick to play with”? Or better yet, “Angela gave the dog a tube of dark purple lipstick to play with”?

Ask yourself which sentences most clearly state who did the actions being described.

Note: This is not my dog, and I did not give her dark purple lipstick to play with on the white livingroom carpeting. I found this on the internet.

However, I am fully capable of doing some thing this stupid with my own dog.



Certain mistakes were made...

Which Voice Should You Use: Active or Passive?

- Most English teachers recommend using active voice because it is more direct, more concise, and the actor of each sentence is very clear. Notice that passive voice just takes longer to read:
 - Passive voice: The window was broken by my brother. (7 words)
 - Active voice: My brother broke the window. (5 words)
 - A two-word difference doesn't seem like much. However multiply this by a 20-page report, and this more wordy writing style can have a negative impact on the reader.
- Most scientists recommend using passive voice because the focus is on the actions within the experiment. No one really cares who is performing the experiment, only the methods and results of the experiment.

My advice: Use active voice unless you've specifically been told that passive voice is used in your class, career, or workplace.

Do You Still Have Questions?

If you still have questions, please stop by the Writing Lab (DI20)

