

Active and Passive Voice

Handout courtesy of Angela Gulick

In most instances, a single thought can be expressed in two ways: in active voice and in passive voice. In most cases, active voice is encouraged because it is more concise and because the agent (do-er) of the action is clear. *Note: Passive voice is not the same as past tense.*

Examples of Active Voice:

- **The cow** jumped over the moon. (agent = the cow)
- **My brother** broke the window. (agent = my brother)
- **The bouncer** threw the drunken patron out of the restaurant. (agent = the bouncer)

On occasion, however, the sentence can be written in the passive voice which means the agent (or do-er) of the action comes at the very end of the sentence.

Examples of Passive Voice:

- The moon was jumped over by **the cow**.
- The window was broken by **my brother**.
- The drunken patron was thrown out of the restaurant by **the bouncer**.

Further, in passive voice, the agent (do-er) of the action can be omitted entirely.

- The moon was jumped over. (by whom?)
- The window was broken. (by whom?)
- The drunken patron was thrown out of the restaurant. (by whom?)

When a Writer Should Use Passive Voice:

It is appropriate to use the passive voice when the agent of the action is less important than 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 (not “The experimenter poured twenty-five milliliters of hydrochloric acid into the beaker.” In this case, readers don’t really care about **who** did the action; the focus is on **the action**).

Sometimes, passive voice is used to obscure the agent of the action, and this can be unethical:

- The window was broken. (by whom? Is it ethical to leave the agent out when the agent is known, such as in “The window was broken by my brother”?)
- Mistakes were made. (by whom? Is it ethical to leave the agent out when the agent is known, such as in “Mistakes were made by me” or “Mistakes were made by The Committee for the Just and Fair Treatment of English Professors”?)

Tips: Most English teachers recommend using active voice unless there is a specific reason not to, such as scientific writing.