

Active and Passive Voice

Professors often ask their students to avoid the passive voice in their writing, but what exactly is the passive voice? In contrast to **active verbs**, which describe an action being done *by* a subject, **passive verbs** describe an action being done *to* a subject. Although there are some cases where the passive voice is appropriate and even preferred, heavy reliance on the passive voice can make your writing wordy and unclear.

The doughnuts **were eaten** by the supermodel.

This sentence is in the passive voice: the doughnuts (the subject) receive the action of being eaten by the supermodel, who is the agent performing the action. In contrast, an active sentence takes the agent for its subject:

The supermodel **ate** the doughnuts.

Both the **passive voice** and the **active voice** are grammatically correct, but you can make your writing more direct by replacing the passive voice with the active voice when possible.

How to Spot the Passive Voice

The main signpost of the passive voice is the presence of a **two-part verb** consisting of a “**to be**” verb and a **past participle**.

“To Be” Verbs: The **passive voice** always uses a “to be” verb. Forms of the verb “to be” include *is, are, was, were, been*.

Past Participles: In addition to a “to be” verb, the passive voice always uses a past participle. Past participles include words such as *eaten*, *thrown*, *explained*, and *considered*.

The wart-covered frog **was kissed** by the princess.

Note the presence of the two-part verb: “was” is a “to be” verb, and “kissed” is a past participle, so this sentence is in the passive voice.

Also, but only *sometimes*, passive voice sentences use “**by**” **phrases**. These phrases introduce the agent with the word “by.” For instance, in the example above, the frog was kissed “**by the princess**,” who is performing the action.

Be aware, however, that many passive voice sentences *do not* include a “by” phrase naming the agent. Sometimes the absence of an agent is acceptable; other times, this omission can be a problem.

A fiber-optic scope and a high-definition camera **are used** to perform the surgery.

Graffiti **was scribbled** over the wall of the classroom.

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Remember, sometimes the passive voice is appropriate and even preferred. In scientific writing, for instance, where the emphasis is on the actions performed rather than the agents doing them, the passive voice has an advantage.

The study **was conducted** in February of 2005.

Also, in some cases, the actor is unknown or unimportant.

All of the honey had **been** shamelessly **stolen** and **consumed**.

In this sentence, the one performing the action is unknown or unclear, and the emphasis is on what happened to the object – in this case, the honey.

Making Passive Sentences Active

In order to turn wordy or vague passive voice sentences into active sentences, ask yourself: “Who or what is doing the action?” Usually, you will need to move this agent towards the beginning of the sentence into the “subject” place and change the verb to active rather than passive.

The Easter eggs **were** all **eaten** by the squirrel before the children arrived.

This sentence contains both a “to be” verb (“were”) and a past participle (“eaten”), so we can see it is passive. Also, who is doing the action? The squirrel!

If we move “the squirrel” towards the beginning of the sentence, we make it the subject. We must then change the verb “were eaten,” which describes the Easter eggs, to “ate,” which describes the action performed by the squirrel. We now have:

The squirrel **ate** all the Easter eggs before the children arrived.

A beautiful active sentence! It is also more clear and concise now, because the agent performing the action is identified more easily in the sentence.

Practice Exercises

In each of the following sentences, identify whether the verb is passive (P) or active (A). If the sentence is active, convert it to passive. If passive, underline the “to be” verb and past participle and circle the agent (if there is one). Then transform the sentence into the active voice by placing the agent towards the beginning of the sentence and changing the verb to active voice.

1. The truffles were easily sniffed out by the clever pig.

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2. The bear found the beehive in a tree by the river.

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3. The sea urchin was slowly cracked open with a rock used by a cunning sea otter.

4. The gentle rabbits were hounded and distressed by the noisy humans.

5. The chickens clucked angrily at the little farm mouse.

Where in *The Bedford Handbook*?

Section 8: Active Verbs, and 62c: Pattern Variations, Passive Transformations