



Passive Voice

What is voice?

Voice indicates the role of the agent in the sentence. In the active voice, the agent performs the action, and the recipient receives the action. The grammar terms often used for agent and recipient are *subject* and *direct object*.

active: Our committee (agent) posted flyers (recipient).

active: The biologist (agent) performed the experiment (recipient).

In the passive voice, the subject receives the action of the verb; the subject is acted upon.

passive: Flyers **were posted** by our committee.

passive: The experiment **was performed** by the biologist.

The verb's past participle is combined with a form of *to be*, and the agent is usually identified in a prepositional phrase beginning with *by*. In some cases, the agent is not identified.

passive = *to be* (or a form of *to be*¹) + past participle

Choosing between active and passive voice

In most writing situations, active voice is preferred over passive voice for the following reasons:

- places the agent performing action in the subject position
- emphasizes the role of the agent over the role of the recipient
- makes the sentence more concise and direct
- propels the action forward—gives prose momentum

In some situations, passive voice is considered a suitable alternative (examples follow):

- recipient is purposefully emphasized
- agent is purposefully de-emphasized or left unmentioned, as in scientific writing
- agent is unknown or unimportant
- agent is obvious or commonly known

examples: The Post-It Note **was invented** in 1974 by 3-M's Arthur Fry.

Three hundred test subjects **were given** the treatment over a thirty-day period.

The tourists were taken hostage and held for three weeks

George Bush **was elected** in 2004.

¹ forms of *to be*: *am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been*

Active voice is used most of the time. Passive voice, used less frequently, has its purposes.

Changing passive voice to active voice

Writers sometimes cast sentences in the passive voice when they should use active. When revising your papers, leave time to check for unnecessary use of passive voice. If you need to change a sentence from passive to active voice, follow these steps:

1. identify the **action**
2. find the **agent** who performs the action
3. rewrite the sentence with the **agent** in the subject position.

example: The new garden **was planted** by **Samantha**. (action = plant; Samantha = agent)
Samantha planted the new garden.

example: The tornado damage **was surveyed** by **the insurance adjuster**.
The insurance adjuster surveyed the tornado damage.

Exercise

Read the following seven passive voice sentences and change them to active voice:

1. Large amounts of potassium are contained in coconut water.
2. The resume will be sent by her tomorrow by end of business day.
3. Many homes have been damaged by the frequent flooding.
4. The findings had been compromised by faulty survey questions.
5. By the day of the wedding, all the floral arrangements will have been reworked by the florists.
6. The defendant is being accused of theft by the prosecutor.
7. Many drivers have been distracted by smartphones.

(Answer key on next page)

Works Consulted

- Bullock, Richard and Francine Weinberg. *The Norton Field Guide to Writing with Handbook*. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 2009. Print.
- Lester, Mark, and Larry Beason. *The McGraw-Hill Handbook of English Grammar and Usage*. 2nd ed. New York: McGraw Hill, 2013. Print.

Exercise answer key:

1. Coconut water contains large amounts of potassium.
2. She will send the resume tomorrow by the end of business day.
3. The frequent flooding has damaged many homes.
4. Faulty survey questions had compromised the findings.
5. The florists will have reworked all the floral arrangements by the day of the wedding.
6. The prosecutor is accusing the defendant of theft.
7. Smartphones have distracted many drivers.