

Passive Voice: When to Use and When to Avoid

What is passive voice?

Passive voice is an often-villainized method of phrasing a sentence as if the sentence's subject undergoes or receives an action.

When a sentence is written using passive voice, it often inserts any form of the verb "to be" between the subject and the subject's verb. While passive voice isn't generally recommended for personal or academic writing, such as cover letters, personal statements, or critical analyses, it is frequently used in scientific reports and certain forms of creative writing.

Example: The bone was found by a dog.

In this example, the dog is the actual "doer" in the sentence—the one performing the action of the verb "found." However, the way the sentence is structured makes "bone" into the subject, even though it is not performing the action of the verb. The word "bone" is being acted upon by a dog. Thus, when written in the passive voice, the "doer"—in this case the dog—is receiving the action instead of directly being the one performing the action of the verb.

In the above example, also note the use of the word "was," which is used in the sentence as the past tense of the verb "be." The presence of any form of the word "be" (e.g., am, is, are, was, were) with the past participle of another verb is the fastest way to flag if a sentence is written in passive voice. In the example, "was" is used with the past participle "found."

Here are two more examples of sentences written in the passive voice.

- The dance class was recommended by Wei.
- The door was closed by Fernando.

As seen in the previous examples, the word "by" is also a passive voice clue, although it is not always present. "By" signifies that the following noun is the one performing the action in the sentence. However, passive voice does not always need "by" to be passive voice, as seen in the following examples. When there is no clear noun performing the action, "by" is not used.

- A decision was made without consulting the others.
- The cake was eaten before I could get a slice.

What is active voice?

When a sentence is written using active voice, it is phrased so the sentence's subject performs an action.

Example: A dog found the bone.

In the above example, there is no use of any form of the word “be,” such as “was,” “is,” or “were.” Without the word “be,” the sentence's action/verb is “found,” and the sentence's subject, “dog,” is directly performing that action. In this example, the subject “dog” is doing the action “found.” The verb “found” requires the direct object “bone” to receive the action.

Here are two more examples of sentences written in the active voice.

- Wei recommended the dance class.
- Fernando closed the door.

Why is active voice preferred?

In many cases, active voice is preferred over passive voice because active voice is perceived as clear, decisive, and concise. Since a subject is performing an action directly, without using any form of “be,” sentences written in active voice use fewer words and convey their meaning faster. Sentences written in the active voice also use stronger, more meaningful verbs, which leads to greater clarity and readability. With its “object first” approach, the passive voice reads as wordy, vague, and unclear.

It's the difference between the two following sentences.

- Passive voice: The successful fundraising event was planned and coordinated by me.
- Active voice: I planned and coordinated the successful fundraising event.

See the difference? The important part of the sentence isn't that there was a fundraising event—it's that *you* did the necessary planning and coordinating.

How can I remove passive voice?

Make the subject perform the action of the verb. Shift the focus of the sentence from the direct or indirect object to the actor.

- Passive voice: The book was borrowed by the girl.
- Active voice: The girl borrowed the book.

If there is no doer in the original sentence, determine who the doer is (if possible) and add them to the sentence as the subject performing the action of the verb.

- Passive voice: The book was read.
- Active voice: The teacher read the book.

When is passive voice acceptable?

Contrary to popular belief, the passive voice is not “wrong,” and it is not an error in writing. There are a number of times and places when the passive voice is preferred.

Scientific Writing

In lab reports and scientific research papers, the object being acted upon is often more important than the doer of the action. For example, if you are writing a physics paper and discussing the energy levels of certain particle types, the focus of the sentences is the research methods that were done on the particles, *not* the people performing the experiment(s).

The use of passive voice makes sure that the scientific process comes first: “Heat was applied to remove electrons from the atoms, creating positive ions.” Who applied the heat is not significant.

Alternatively, if you're reading a sociological study, it might read like this: “The sample pool of 1000 people was interviewed on their daily eating and exercising habits.” The people being interviewed are the focus of the sentence—not the person who did the interviewing.

These passive sentences are still clear and understandable. The writer does not need to add names, pronouns, or other words that might distract from the experiment or process taking place.

Unknown or Unimportant Doer

When the person or the object being acted upon is more important than the doer, use passive voice. For example, you might say, “Meryl Streep was awarded the Oscar.” The actress is more important than the doer (whoever awarded her the Oscar). The passive construction allows the reader to focus on Meryl Streep—the woman who won an esteemed award—instead of the person who handed it to her. That individual, in this context, is unimportant.

You might also have to use the passive voice if you do not know the doer of a specific action. For example, if you are discussing a historical battle, it is easier to say, “A barrage of shots was fired from both sides.”

The passive voice can also be used to intentionally hide the doer of an action to avoid assigning blame. If the writer wants to intentionally obfuscate who or what is responsible for something, it may be kinder and less accusatory to write in the passive voice.

- Passive voice: A mistake was made that cost the company \$1,000,000.
- Active voice: Malik made a mistake that cost the company \$1,000,000.

Creative Writing

Without a subject, passive voice in creative writing can create a sense of suspense or mystery. Both examples below use the passive voice (in italics) effectively for this purpose.

- *The door was slammed sharply from the outside.* Sarah jumped up and rushed to the window, but she couldn't see who had done it. A trail of bloody footprints marked a path from the doorstep to the border of the dark woods.
- Alexander slowly returned to consciousness. *His wounded arm was being carefully tended by gentle hands.* A graceful silhouette, backlit by the fire, held a cup of fragrant tea to his lips.

Using passive voice ensures that you can keep the actual doer of the action well hidden until it's time for a big reveal.

Conclusion

Though passive voice has a bad reputation, it is grammatically correct and has plenty of appropriate uses, especially in STEM writing. It is important to know how and when to use both active and passive voice.

Activity

Practice switching between active and passive voice using these sentences. First, identify whether or not the sentence is written in active or passive voice. Then, rewrite the sentence in the opposite way— if the example is in active voice, rewrite it in passive voice, and vice versa.

1. The dress was chosen by Christina.
2. Anderson and Kaine published a study on brain activity during sleep.
3. The paper was written quickly by the student.
4. Leon scheduled a long list of activities for the kids.
5. The window paintings were created by students.
6. My first-edition book was signed by the author.
7. Oscar Wilde wrote many plays, including *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
8. The singer wrote and composed every song on the album.
9. Makayla's friend painted her nails.
10. The cake was decorated.

Answer Key for Activity

1. Passive voice. Rewrite: Christina chose the dress.
2. Active voice. Rewrite: A study on brain activity during sleep was published by Anderson and Kaine.
3. Passive voice. Rewrite: The student quickly wrote the paper.
4. Active voice. Rewrite: A long list of activities for the kids was scheduled by Leon.
5. Passive voice. Rewrite: The students created the window paintings.
6. Passive voice. Rewrite: The author signed my first-edition book.
7. Active voice. Rewrite: Many plays, including *The Importance of Being Earnest*, were written by Oscar Wilde.
8. Active voice. Rewrite: Every song on the album was written and composed by the singer.
9. Active voice. Rewrite: Makayla's nails were painted by a friend.
10. Passive voice. Rewrite: We decorated the cake.