

How to Recognize and Eliminate Passive Voice

In active voice the subject is doing the action.

- a. *The cat ate the food.*
- b. *Sally recommended that the student attend the workshop.*
- c. *Misty closed the door.*

In passive voice the subject is acted upon.

- a. *The food was eaten by the cat.*
- b. *The student was recommended by Sally to attend the workshop.*
- c. *The door was closed by Misty.*

Compare *Sally recommended that the student attend the workshop* with *The student was recommended by Sally to attend the workshop*. The sentence written in passive voice is wordy, vague, and ineffective.

Use the following three “tests” to determine if a sentence is written in passive voice. Use the sentence *The door was closed by Misty* as an example.

1. The subject is not the doer; it is being acted upon. (In the example, the subject *door* is being acted upon by the doer *Misty*.)
2. A form of be (am, is, are, was, were) appears with a past participle.¹ (In the example, *was* is used with the past participle *closed*.)
3. The phrase “by [someone or something]” either appears in the sentence, or it can be added. (In the example, the “by + a doer” phrase is *by Misty*.)

Eliminate passive voice by making the subject do the action. You can shift the focus of the sentence from the direct or indirect object to the actor. For example, you can transform the following sentence from passive to active voice.

Passive: *The tree was cut down by the man.*
Active: *The man cut down the tree.*

However, sometimes passive voice is preferable. When the person or the object being acted upon is more important than the doer, you should use passive voice.

Example: *President Kennedy was shot today.*

Since the President is more important than the doer in the above sentence, you want to focus on the President.

You can also use passive voice to avoid the personal “I” in formal or scientific writing.

Example: *The experiment was conducted on six varieties of corn.*

¹ Past participle is used with have, has, or had to form the perfect tenses (have gone, had written); with a form of the “be” verb to form the passive voice (was eaten, was closed); and as an adjective (the polished silver).

Exercise: Transform passive voice to active voice in the following sentences.

1. Why was the ball thrown by the boy?
2. Research on memory scanning was conducted by Reed and Williams.
3. The independent variable was manipulated by the experimenter.
4. The blue ball was favored by the boy.
5. She was admired by the boy.

Key:

1. Why did the boy throw the ball?
2. Reed and Williams researched memory scanning.
3. The experimenter manipulated the independent variable.
4. The boy favored the blue ball.
5. The boy admired her.