

How to Recognize and Eliminate Passive Voice

To be able to recognize and eliminate passive voice, you first need to be able to differentiate between active and passive voice.

Recognizing Active Voice

In active voice, the subject is doing the action. Active voice uses transitive verbs, which transfer action across to direct objects.

Example: The **dog** *found* the **bone**.

In this example, the subject (**dog**) is doing the action (*found*), and the verb *found* requires a direct object (**bone**) to receive the action.

Here are two more examples of active voice.

Amy *recommended* the **dance class**.

Ben *closed* the **door**.

In these examples, the subjects (**Amy** and **Ben**) are performing the actions of the verbs (*recommended* and *closed*), and the direct objects of the sentences (**dance class** and **door**) are receiving the action.

Recognizing Passive Voice

In passive voice, the subject is acted upon.

Example: The **bone** *was found* by the **dog**.

In this example, **bone** is the subject, but it is not performing the action of the verb. The word **bone** is being acted upon by the **dog**.

Here are two more examples of passive voice.

The **dance class** *was recommended* by **Amy**.

The **door** *was closed* by **Ben**.

In these sentences, **Amy** and **Ben** are not performing the actions of the verbs. As a result, the sentences are wordier and less direct.

Testing to Identify Passive Voice

You must be able to identify passive voice and know how to change it to active voice. Active voice is preferred over passive voice because active voice is clear and concise. Passive voice is wordy, vague, and ineffective. However, passive voice can be used in scientific writing when the object being acted upon is more important than the doer of the action.

To test for passive voice, use this sentence as an example: *The door was closed by Ben.*

1. The subject is not the doer; it is being acted upon. In the example, Ben is the one who closed the door; however, the sentence is not structured to reflect a clear character-action relationship. Instead, Ben is being acted upon.
2. A form of the verb "to be" (am, is, are, was, were) appears with the past participle of another verb. In the example, "was" is used with the past participle "closed."
3. The phrase "by [someone or something]" appears in the sentence. In the example, the phrase "by Ben" is used.
4. The phrase "by [someone or something]" can be added to the sentence if it is not already present. If the sample sentence were "The door was closed," the phrase "by Ben" could be added to the end of it.

Eliminating 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: The **book** *was borrowed* by **the girl**.

Active: **The girl** *borrowed* the **book**.

If there is no doer in the original sentence, determine who the doer is and add him or her to the sentence.

Passive: The **book** *was read*.

Active: **The teacher** *read* the **book**.

Using Passive Voice

Sometimes passive voice is preferable. 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 (since 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.

In scientific writing, use passive voice to avoid the personal "I." The doer is not important; instead, the focus should be on the process and the results of an experiment. You might say, "The experiment was conducted using temperature as an independent variable." The result is important—the scientist who conducted the experiment is not.

Activity

Change passive voice to active voice in the following sentences.

1. The dress was chosen by Christina.
2. Research on dreaming was conducted by James and Porter.
3. The paper was written.
4. The cars are owned by Leon.
5. The artwork was painted by students.
6. My book was signed by the author.
7. That quote was said by Oscar Wilde.
8. The song was written by the singer.
9. Diana's nails were painted by a friend.
10. The cake was decorated.

Answer Key for Activity

1. Christina chose the dress.
2. James and Porter conducted research on dreaming.
3. I wrote the paper.
4. Leon owns the cars.
5. Students painted the artwork.
6. The author signed my book.
7. Oscar Wilde said that quote.
8. The singer wrote the song.
9. A friend painted Diana's nails.
10. We decorated the cake.