

Active and Passive Voice

Recognizing the Active and the Passive Voice

“Voice” is the part of the verb that tells us whether the subject is acting (the one doing the action) or being acted upon (having the action done to him/her/it).

When the subject of a sentence is doing the action, the sentence is said to be in the “active voice.”

When the subject of a sentence is being acted upon the sentence is said to be in the “passive voice.”

Here are some examples:

Active voice: He served us.

Passive voice: We were served by him.

Active voice: The dog chased the cat.

Passive voice: The cat was chased by the dog.

- It is generally wise to use the passive voice sparingly; the use of the active voice makes your writing vibrant, direct.

Writing Tips for Active and Passive Voice

The majority of English sentences use active voice. Active voice is usually the most effective sentence structure because it conveys ideas more directly and concisely. The passive voice tends to sound distant; it usually requires longer sentences, and can sometimes sound contrived.

The voice of the verb indicates whether the subject acts (active) or is acted upon (passive).

Active voice: subject + verb + object

My sister taught me to paint.

Passive voice: object + verb + subject (inverted sentence structure)

I was taught to paint by my sister.

The passive voice also consists of a form of the verb BE (was, is, am, were, are) + the past participle of the main verb in the sentence.

Passive: Five species of birds were studied in my biology lab.

Active: I studied five species of birds in my biology lab.

Uses for Active Voice

1) The active voice gets to the point directly and concisely.

Passive: Being outdoors has always been enjoyed by me (eight words).

Active: I have always enjoyed being outdoors (six words).

2) The active voice emphasizes the actor (the doer of the action); the passive voice emphasizes the receiver of the action.

Active: The teacher gave Julie a detention.

Passive: Julie was given a detention by the teacher.

Uses for Passive Voice

1) The passive voice is used to avoid being too personal and to emphasize the receiver of the action, rather than the performer, by avoiding the use of the subject.

Active: You must return the library book today.

Passive: The library book must be returned today.

Active: People could hear the party from blocks away.

Passive: The party could be heard from blocks away.

Since the need to return the book is meant to be impersonal and it is not important who heard the party, the passive is preferable here.

Important Note : In some disciplines and in certain contexts, an instructor may require that you write in the passive voice. If you are in doubt as to the writing style required, it is always best to check with your instructor (or publisher).

resale or redistribution requires written permission from the Memorial University of Newfoundland Writing Centre at writing@mun.ca, Writing Centre, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NL, Canada, A1C 57S.