


# Active and Passive Voice

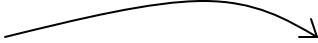


English has two voices, **active** and **passive**, which describe the relationship between the subject and the verb of the sentence. Understanding the use and effect of both voices will help you compose clearer, more powerful sentences.

## ACTIVE VOICE

In a sentence using **active voice**, the subject performs the action expressed by the verb.

*The boy*  *hit* *the ball*.

*The researchers*  *have formed* *a hypothesis*.

(The arrows point from the subject performing the action to the object being acted upon.)

Active voice is clearer and more direct because it identifies the actor. Using active verbs is a way to make your writing more powerful and concise, and keeps the sentence from being too complicated or wordy.

## PASSIVE VOICE

In a sentence using **passive voice**, the verb's action is performed *upon* the subject. The agent performing the action may be included in a "by the" phrase, or it may be omitted.

*The ball*  *was hit* *by the boy*.

*A hypothesis*  *was formed* *by the researchers*.

## AVOIDING PASSIVE VOICE

Many writers try to avoid passive voice because it can cloud meaning and create unnecessarily awkward, wordy sentences. Notice how much clearer the active voice is in these cases.

**Passive:** *The quiz was failed by ten students.*

**Active:** *Ten students failed the quiz.*

**Passive:** *The crime will be investigated by the police.*

**Active:** *Police will investigate the crime.*

## CHOOSING PASSIVE VOICE

Passive voice emphasizes the action and/or the receiver of action and may be more appropriate in certain rhetorical situations: *Rules are made to be broken.*

Using the passive voice makes sense when the agent performing the action is obvious, unknown, or unimportant: *A new, experimental lung transplant operation was performed for the first time yesterday.*

Writers in the sciences conventionally use passive voice in order to deemphasize their role as researchers and instead highlight procedures and results: *Heart rate and blood pressure were measured to gauge overall fitness.*

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## CHANGING PASSIVE TO ACTIVE

To change a sentence from passive to active, look for the “by the” phrase to identify the agent of action. Then, make that agent the subject of the sentence and change the verb accordingly.

*The test is being taken by the entire class.* —————→ *The entire class is taking the test.*

*The witnesses were interviewed by the detective.* —————→ *The detective interviewed the witnesses.*

Sometimes, you may have to infer the agent from surrounding sentences. Ask yourself, “Who or what is doing the action?”

*Mary was notified about the snow day.* —————→ *A radio bulletin notified Mary about the snow day.*

## Here are some examples of active verbs you can use to enhance your writing.

Accepts	Acknowledges	Adds	Admires
Affirms	Allows	Analyzes	Announces
Answers	Argues	Assembles	Asserts
Assists	Believes	Buttresses	Categorizes
Cautions	Challenges	Claims	Clarifies
Compares	Complicates	Concludes	Condemns
Conflates	Confronts	Confuses	Considers
Contradicts	Contrasts	Convinces	Criticizes
Critiques	Declares	Defends	Defies
Demands	Denies	Describes	Determines
Diminishes	Disconfirms	Discusses	Disputes
Disregards	Distinguishes	Emphasizes	Endorses
Enumerates	Exaggerates	Experiments	Experiences
Explains	Explores	Expounds	Facilitates
Formulates	Grants	Guides	Handles
Hesitates	Highlights	Hints	Hypothesizes
Identifies	Illuminates	Implies	Infers
Informs	Initiates	Insinuates	Insists
Interprets	Judges	Lists	Maintains
Narrates	Negates	Observes	Outlines
Parses	Perceives	Persists	Persuades
Pleads	Points out	Postulates	Praises
Proposes	Provides	Qualifies	Quotes
Ratifies	Reconsiders	Refines	Regards
Rejects	Relinquishes	Reminds	Repudiates
Resolves	Responds	Retorts	Reveals
Reviews	Seeks	Shares	Shows
Simplifies	States	Stresses	Suggests
Summarizes	Supplements	Supplies	Supports

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