

English VI

When to use the Passive Voice

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Zachary Chui – Room A323

zchui@ipm.edu.mo

Lesson 3

Active vs. Passive Voice

In a sentence written in the active voice, the subject of sentence performs the action. In a sentence written in the passive voice the subject receives the action.

Active: *The candidate believes that Congress must place a ceiling on the budget.*

Passive: *It is believed by the candidate that a ceiling on the budget must be placed by Congress.*

Active vs. Passive Voice

Active: *Researchers showed that high stress can cause heart attacks.*

Passive: *It was showed that heart attacks can be caused by high stress.*

Active: *The dog bit the man.*

Passive: *The man was bitten by the dog.*

When to use the Passive Voice

1) To emphasize the action rather than the actor

- *After a long debate, the proposal was endorsed by the planning committee.*

When to use the Passive Voice

2) To keep the subject and focus consistent throughout a passage

- *The data processing department recently presented a controversial proposal to expand its staff. After long debate, the proposal was endorsed by the budget committee.*

When to use the Passive Voice

3) To be tactful (polite) by not naming the actor

- *The messages were somehow misinterpreted.*

When to use the Passive Voice

4) To describe a condition in which the actor is unknown or unimportant; factual information

- *Every year, thousands of people are diagnosed as having cancer.*

When to use the Passive Voice

5) To create an authoritative tone

- *Visitors are not allowed after 10:00 pm.*

A QUICK GUIDE TO ACTIVE VERSUS PASSIVE VOICE

Active:

The student completed his first year of college with very good grades.

Here the subject of "*the student*" comes first, followed by the single verb "*completed*," and, finally, the object, which is "*his first year of college*."

What is Active Voice?

Active voice is the grammar structure in which the **subject comes before the object** in the sentence and shows a direct action on the object in the sentence. Active voice is preferred in most writing.

Passive:

The first year of college was completed by the student with very good grades.

Here, the object of "*the first year of college*" comes first, followed by two verbs "*was completed*," and, finally, the **subject**, which is "*the student*." Notice how "*with very good grades*" is ambiguous. Did the student get good grades in his first year of college, or has the student always earned good grades? In other words, it is not clear if "*with very good grades*" describes "*the first year of college*" or if it describes "*the student*."

What is Passive Voice?

Passive voice is the grammar structure in which **the object comes before the subject in the sentence**, thus making the action indirect.

You can usually recognize passive voice by the two verbs that need to be used to show past action. This tends to make sentences in passive voice less concise.

Some inexperienced writers think this is a good thing, since some formal writing is not concise; however, passive voice is only preferred in writing where the attention should be on the object, not on the subject who has performed the action.

Passive voice is tricky because it can lead to ambiguity in the meaning of the sentences.

Comparison of Active vs. Passive Voice

	Active	Passive
Present Simple	<i>makes...</i>	<i>is made...</i>
Present Continuous	<i>is making...</i>	<i>is being made...</i>
Present Perfect	<i>has made...</i>	<i>has been made...</i>
Past Simple	<i>made...</i>	<i>was made...</i>
Past Continuous	<i>was making...</i>	<i>was being made...</i>
Past Perfect	<i>had made...</i>	<i>had been made...</i>
Future Simple	<i>will make...</i>	<i>will be made...</i>
Future Perfect	<i>will have made...</i>	<i>will have been made...</i>
Gerund	<i>making</i>	<i>being made</i>
Infinitive	<i>make/to make</i>	<i>be made/to be made</i>