

Introduction:

*Sentences can be described as active or passive. Sentences are usually constructed using the **active voice** with a **subject**, **verb** and **object**.*

*Using the **passive voice** is a way of writing sentences so that the subject has the action 'done' to it – the object of the sentence comes first. The passive voice can be useful for making writing sound more formal and objective by focussing on the result of an action rather than the person doing the action.*

Definition:

Active voice:

*In a sentence written in the active voice, the **subject** of the sentence performs the action. Sentences which use the active voice are usually more straightforward to understand as they are clear and direct.*

Both these sentences use the active voice:

- The winner of the race lifted the trophy.*

- *The doctor examined the patient.*

The subject 'the winner of the race' performs the action described by the verb 'lifted'. The subject 'the doctor' performs the action described by 'examined'. The subjects are all doing something – they are all taking action in these sentences.

Passive voice

*In a sentence written in the passive voice the **subject** is acted on by the **verb**.*

Examples:

Active: The puppy chewed the toy.

Passive: The toy was chewed by the puppy.

Passive: The toy was chewed.

*To create the passive voice, add the verb 'to be' (in the correct tense) and then the main verb. Often a **preposition** such as 'by' is also used For example: The patient was (past tense of to be) examined (verb) by (preposition) the doctor. Exams have to be taken every year by pupils.*

Active and Passive Voice

*In a sentence, main verbs can be in active or passive voice. A main verb is **active** when the subject of the sentence is the **doer** (or the **agent**) of the action. A main verb is **passive** when the subject of the sentence is the **receiver** of the action. In passive voice, the verb is composed of a form of “to be” (e.g. is, is being, was, will be) + the past participle form of the verb (e.g. watched, stolen, made, seen). This is how passive is formed in different tenses:*

<i>Tense</i>	<i>Simple</i>	<i>Progressive</i>	<i>Perfect</i>
<i>Present</i>	<i>it is explained</i>	<i>it is being explained</i>	<i>it has been explained</i>
<i>Past</i>	<i>it was explained</i>	<i>it was being explained</i>	<i>it had been explained</i>
<i>Future</i>	<i>it will be explained</i>	<i>it will be being explained*</i>	<i>it will have been explained*</i>

*

These forms as well as the forms in the perfect progressive aspect (not included here) are uncommon.

The agent of the action is not always stated in a passive voice sentence. When it is stated, it is placed in a “by” prepositional phrase.

Active	Passive
<i>The sports fans are applauding Jess.</i>	<i>Barry is being applauded [by the sports fans].</i>
<i>We made mistakes.</i>	<i>Mistakes were made [by us].</i>
<i>I will fix the problem.</i>	<i>The problem will be fixed [by me].</i>

When should active voice be used?

Sentences containing active voice can be easier to process and understand than passive voice sentences. This is because they provide more information (the agent of the action), and possibly because native

English speakers are accustomed to receiving the information in the order agent-action-receiver. Active voice sentences may be more concise than passive voice sentences because they eliminate the need for a helping verb “be” and the preposition “by.” In the example below, note how placing emphasis on the agent

When should passive voice be used?

Passive voice is frequently used in lab reports and Methods sections of research reports because it puts the emphasis on the experiment or process being described rather than on the researcher. In the examples below, note how omitting the agent of the action emphasizes the experiment itself and excludes irrelevant information:

Active: *The scientist heated the solution to the boiling point.*

Passive: *The solution was heated to the boiling point.*

Passive voice is also appropriate in the following cases:

- when a writer wants to de-emphasize who or what is responsible for a given action/problem

- when the agent is unknown

Active versus passive

Using the active voice in a sentence often means less words are used than in the passive voice.

For example:

- Passive: The books were collected by the teacher. (7 words)*
- Active: The teacher collected the books. (5 words)*

Passive sentences can cause confusion because they can be vague about who is responsible for the action. For example, 'A goal was scored'. Who scored the goal? Doesn't the writer know?

Converting sentences to active voice

One way to avoid using the passive voice is to look for a 'by' phrase. Rewrite the sentence so that the subject in the 'by' phrase is closer to the beginning of the sentence.

For example: 'The exam was passed by the pupil' would change to 'The pupil passed the exam'.

Reasons to use the passive voice

Although the active voice is usually the preferred choice, there are sometimes good reasons to use the passive voice:

- *To show interest in the person or object that experiences an action rather than the person or object that performs the action.
For example, the castle was built in 1066 - we are interested in the castle, not in who built it.*
- *Because we don't know or do not want to say who performed the action.
For example, 'I had the feeling that I was being watched.' - I don't know who was watching me*
- *To create an authoritative or factual tone.
For example, 'Pupils are not allowed in the dining hall after 1:45 p.m.' - it is a general rule*