

# Passive Voice

## Definition of Passive Voice

A passive [voice](#) is a type of a clause or sentence in which an action (through verb), or an object of a sentence, is emphasized rather than its subject.

Simply, the subject receives the action of the verb. The emphasis or focus is on the action, while the subject is not known or is less important.

For instance, in the sentence “[Fern] found an old milking stool that had been discarded, and she placed the stool in the sheepfold next to Wilbur’s pen” (*Charlotte’s Web*, by E.B. White), the underlined phrase is an example of a passive voice in which the author has not identified the subject – the reader does not know who discarded the milking stool. Rather, the focus is on the action of placing the abandoned stool.

## Everyday Use of Passive Voice

**A book was written.**

The focus in this sentence is on the action of a *book* that was written; however, readers do not know who wrote the book.

**Many people were killed in the war against terrorism.**

The emphasis is on the action “were killed.” Here again the subject is not identified.

**The house was renovated last week.**

The “house” has become the subject in this sentence, as it receives the action.

**The function is ruined.**

The focus is on something having been ruined, but the readers do not know who has ruined it.

## Types of Passive Voice

**Short Passive** – In this type of construction, the subject or the performer is not known. For instance, in the phrase “a mistake is made,” there is no subject, or the subject is unknown.

**Long Passive** – In this type of construction, the object becomes the subject of the sentence. For instance, in the sentence, “The house was cleaned by aunty,” the object “the house” has become the subject.

## Examples of Passive Voice in Literature

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### Example #1: *The Oxford History of the American People* (by Samuel Eliot Morison)

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“America was discovered accidentally by a great seaman who was looking for something else... America was named after a man who discovered no part of the New World. History is like that, very chancy.”

Here, author Samuel Eliot Morison has employed passive voice in the underlined phrases. The first one is a short passive, while the second one is a long passive.

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### Example #2: *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (by Douglas Adams)

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“In the beginning the Universe was created. This has made a lot of people very angry and has been widely regarded as a bad move.”

Both of these sentences have used passive voice. They have identified neither the subject, nor the performer. However, the action is clear; the readers are able to understand the meanings.

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### Example #3: *Psychological Foundations of Educational Technology* (by W.C. Trow and E.E. Haddan)

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“Thus it is believed that in the elementary school a class of fifteen pupils for one teacher gives better results than either a class of three or a class of thirty.”

In this long sentence, the subject is not identified, as the emphasis is on the action of “believing.” This leaves the question of who believes.

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**Example #4: *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well* (by Maya Angelou)**

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“Her bones were found  
round thirty years later  
when they razed  
her building to  
put up a parking lot.”

The underlined phrase is an example of a short passive voice construction in which the subject (who found her bones) is not known, because the sentence emphasizes the action and not the subject.

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**Example #5: *The Master of the Game* (by Sidney Sheldon)**

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“The large ballroom was crowded with familiar ghosts come to help celebrate her birthday... Earlier, dinner had been served outdoors. The large and formal garden had been festively decorated with lanterns and ribbons and balloons. Their corpses had been perfectly preserved by the ammonia in the air, and their hair had turned a bright red.”

Sidney Sheldon has not mentioned who crowded the ballroom, who served the dinner, or who decorated garden. He has only mentioned the actions to draw the attention of the readers to the preparations.

## **Function of Passive Voice**

[Style](#) guides do not support the use of passive voice in technical writings, because it makes the text lengthy, slow to read, and often ambiguous. However, it is very common in literature, lab reports, and scientific writings, where the performer is given lesser importance than the action. In these types of writings, a passive voice is very helpful to avoid taking responsibility of the actions. It is also useful when a writer wants to shift

