

Passive Voice

“We have not passed that subtle line between childhood and adulthood until we move from the passive voice to the active voice – that is, until we have stopped saying ‘it got lost’ and say ‘I lost it’” –Sydney J. Harris

Passive and active voice are stylistic choices that determine where emphasis is placed in a sentence. Both voices are grammatically correct. However, different disciplines have different standards for how they are used. Passive voice is discouraged in many humanities disciplines, but many scientific disciplines actively encourage it. Before deciding whether to use passive or active voice, though, the terms should be defined.

WHAT ARE ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE?

Active voice occurs when the subject of the sentence *performs* the action of the sentence. Passive voice occurs when the subject of the sentence *receives* the action. In the following examples, the subjects of each sentence are bolded while the verbs are underlined.

Passive Voice

Karl was bitten by a poisonous spider.

Payment is wanted by the mob boss.

The world can be shown to you by me.

Active Voice

A poisonous spider bit Karl.

The mob boss wants payment.

I can show you the world.

HOW TO SPOT PASSIVE VOICE

Right away, you will likely notice some differences between the sentences in passive voice and those in active voice. Most obviously, the verbs in the passive constructions are longer because they include a form of the verb “to be.” You might also notice that the active constructions tend, as a whole, to be shorter and less wordy (particularly that last one).

You might also note that the passive constructions end with a prepositional phrase (by + noun). This phrase can be dropped from the passive constructions without affecting the grammatical correctness of the sentence.

Karl was bitten. ~~by a poisonous spider~~

Payment is wanted. ~~by the mob boss~~

The world can be shown to you. ~~by me~~

These prepositional phrases are commonly left off of passive constructions, which can make them harder to spot and more difficult to turn into active constructions.

Passive Voice

Violence was advocated.

Mistakes were made.

We were followed.

Active Voice

Someone or something advocated violence.

Someone or something made mistakes.

Someone or something followed us.

To find passive voice when it is formatted this way, add the prepositional phrase “by zombies” to the end of the sentence. If new sentence makes grammatical sense, then it is a passive construction:

Violence was advocated *by zombies*.

Mistakes were made *by zombies*.

We were followed *by zombies*.

POP QUIZ: there are four passive constructions (not necessarily full sentences) in the first paragraph of this handout. Can you find them? (Answers are on the back of this sheet).

WHEN TO AVOID PASSIVE VOICE

Most style guides recommend avoiding passive voice, since it is wordier and more vague than active voice. When you revise, try to change passive constructions to active ones by locating the actor and making it the subject of the sentence.

The world can be shown to you **by me**. → **I** can show you the world.

The maze was completed **by the mouse** in 10 seconds. → **The mouse** completed the maze in 10 seconds.

This is trickier when the actor is not already in the sentence, but specifying it will add clarity and precision to your writing.

Mistakes were made.	→	We made mistakes. George W. Bush made mistakes.
Karl was bitten.	→	Zombies bit Karl. George W. Bush bit Karl.
Passive voice is often overused.	→	I often overuse passive voice Students often overuse passive voice.

WHEN PASSIVE VOICE IS APPROPRIATE

Passive voice is often overused, which is why many style guides recommend against it. However, there are some cases in which its use is more appropriate and effective than active voice.

- **To avoid first person and focus on the subject matter**, as in scientific or technical writing. Scientists are divided on the use of first person, and some of them require the use of passive voice to preserve an objective tone and to place emphasis on the process and materials rather than on the researcher.

I sewed body parts together to create a monster. → **Body parts** were sewn together to create a monster.

We fed the mice a phosphorescent diet. → **The mice** were fed a phosphorescent diet.

- **When attention ought to be on the object rather than the actor**. Sometimes, the object of a sentence is more interesting or appropriate to emphasize than the actor.

The plane crash was featured on the 6:00 news.
(The plane crash is more interesting than the 6:00 news).

Sometimes, the decision to use passive voice depends on context and/or audience.

A poisonous spider bit Karl. → **Karl** was bitten by a poisonous spider.
(The emphasis is on the spider). (The emphasis is on Karl and his well-being).

- **When an actor is unknown or unimportant**.

Shots were fired.
(No one knows – or no one wants to say – who fired them).

Passive voice should be avoided at all costs.
(The sentence is a general statement and an individual agent is not important).

The answers to the quiz on the previous page are (in order): emphasis is placed (by zombies), they are used (by zombies), passive voice is discouraged (by zombies), and terms should be defined (by zombies).