



The Passive Voice

What is the Passive Voice?

One of the many characteristics of a verb is **voice**, which has to do with which word receives the action of the verb. A verb may have active voice or passive voice. In a sentence with an active verb, the action of the verb affects a direct object, for example:

I eat → the soup.

In a sentence with a passive verb, the action of the verb affects the **subject**, for example:

The soup ← is eaten.

Voice applies only to verbs like *eat* that can take an object. In an active sentence it is clear who performs the action of the verb: the subject. In a passive sentence, though, the doer of the verb can become obscure, as in the second example (who is eating the soup?).

The doer of the verb can be expressed after the word *by*—The soup is eaten **by** me—but it is not grammatically necessary (the “doer” is known as the **agent**, and in active sentences the agent and the subject are the same).

What’s Wrong with the Passive Voice?

The passive voice is frowned upon in most academic writing, and in many nonacademic settings as well. For one thing, it can be used to obscure responsibility for an action (how many times have you heard a politician say “Mistakes were made”?), since it is easy to leave out the agent. Another problem with passive voice is that it is often needlessly complicated.

COMPLICATED (PASSIVE) All the books on the list were read by me.

SIMPLER (ACTIVE) I read all the books on the list.

When is it Okay to go Passive?

The passive voice is encouraged in some science writing, especially when detailing experimental methods. It is used to keep the focus on the experiment instead of the experimenter (“The water was heated to 50° C” rather than “I heated the water to 50° C”). It can also be appropriate to use the passive voice when the receiver of the verb’s action is the most important thing in a sentence, or the part the reader is already familiar with—“John looked both ways, started crossing the street, and was hit by a bus” works better than “John looked both ways, started crossing the street, and a bus hit him.” When using passive voice outside of a lab report, however, it is best to keep it very limited.

How Can I Recognize a Passive Verb?

There are two ways to find a passive verb: grammatically or by its meaning. Grammatically, the passive is formed by a form of the verb *be* (*am, is, are, was, were, be, been*) followed by a past participle like *eaten, done, used, or kept*. If you have trouble recognizing participles, ask yourself, “Who or what is *doing* this verb?” If the agent of the verb is the same as the subject of the sentence, it’s active. If not, you’ve got a passive verb.

How do I Make Passive Verbs Active?

The easiest way to get rid of an unwanted passive verb is to make it active. First, ask who or what is performing the action: who or what is the agent. Then rewrite the sentence with the agent as the subject. The rest should fall into place. If you can't answer the question of who the agent is, the idea may be too weak to be worth keeping in your paper. If you can identify the agent, but the sentence becomes awkward when you make it active, you may want to keep it as one of your few passives. If making a specific passive sentence active is not working out, try scrapping the sentence altogether and thinking of another way to express the idea.

One less effective solution is using verbs that are active in form but have passive meanings, such as *seem*, *appear*, or sometimes *become*. Using such verbs can help you get away from the passive, but it's more of a band-aid than a real fix since they share the same weaknesses truly passive verbs have.

Other Uses of *Be* Verbs

One of the easiest ways to catch a passive verb is to look for a form of the verb *be* (*am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, *be*, *been*). However, this can sometimes be confusing, since *be* verbs are also used in several other kinds of constructions. Here are a few other common uses of *be*.

As a copulative/linking verb

Be is frequently used to *link* the subject of a sentence to a description, usually a noun, adjective, or prepositional phrase.

John is a vegetarian.
Fernando was tall.
Henrietta was in the store.

As a statement of existence

We frequently use *be* verbs simply to state the existence of a thing or a state of affairs. Usually it is preceded by *it* or *there*.

There are bears in Yellowstone.
It's true that life is short.

To show ongoing action

Be is also used to indicate ongoing or continual action (known as progressive aspect). When used in a progressive construction, the *be* verb precedes a present participle (a verb ending in *-ing*) instead of the past participle associated with passive verbs. A progressive verb can be past, present, or future tense.

I **am going** to the store.
You **were going** to the store.
She will **be going** to the store.

To make matters worse, a verb can be both passive and progressive at the same time. If so, it will have two *be* verbs in the same verb phrase (I **am being** sued).