

# Active vs. Passive Voice

**Voice** indicates whether the subject of a sentence is the actor or the receiver of the action. In the **active voice**, the subject of the sentence does the acting; in the **passive voice**, the subject is acted upon.

**Active Voice:** Our neighbor's dog bit my son.

**Passive Voice:** My son was bitten by our neighbor's dog.

## Recognizing

**Voice:** You can recognize passive-voice expressions because the verb phrase will always include a form of the verb *to be*, such as *am, is, was, were, are, or been* (the presence of a *be*-verb, however, does not necessarily mean that the sentence is in passive voice). Another way to recognize passive-voice sentences is that the verb may be followed by a "by..." phrase which indicates the agent performing the action.

## Passive

**Voice:** Sometimes the use of passive voice can create long and awkward sentences that cause the reader to lose interest or become confused. Also, overuse of the passive voice throughout an essay can cause your writing to seem flat and uninteresting. Passive voice can be useful, however, when the identity of the person performing the action is irrelevant, unknown, or purposefully left out.

*In scientific writing, passive voice is more readily accepted because it allows the author to write without having to identify particular researchers.*

**Example:** The beaker was filled with a saline solution.

*Passive voice is useful when describing an act of god or an action whose agent is unknown.*

**Example:** Thousands of people were killed in the earthquake.

*Passive voice can also be used to confuse readers and evade responsibility.*

**Example:** It is regrettable that the flowers were not delivered on time.

**Note:** When using passive voice, only use the "by..." phrase if the agent of the action must be known in order to convey the main idea of the sentence.

**Necessary:** Our textbook was written *by John Langdan*.

**Not Necessary:** Many varieties of grapes are grown in California *by farmers*.

## Active

**Voice:** Sentences in active voice are generally, though not always, clearer and more direct than those in passive voice. Sentences in active voice are also more concise than those in passive voice because fewer words are required to express action in active voice. For these reasons, college instructors usually encourage students to avoid the passive voice.

**Passive: (more wordy)**

The brakes were slammed on by her as the car sped downhill.

**Active: (clear and direct)**

She slammed on the brakes as the car sped downhill.

## Changing passive to active:

If you want to change a passive-voice sentence to active voice, find the agent in a "by..." phrase, or consider carefully who or what is performing the action expressed in the verb. Make that agent the subject of the sentence, and change the verb accordingly.

**Example:** A novel *is being read* by George. (passive)

George *is reading* a novel. (active)

**\*Exercise:**

DETERMINE WHICH VERBS IN THE FOLLOWING PARAGRAPH SHOULD BE CHANGED FROM THE PASSIVE TO THE ACTIVE VOICE. REWRITE THOSE SENTENCES BETWEEN THE LINES.

Rockets were invented by the Chinese about A.D. 1000. Gunpowder was packed into bamboo tubes and ignited by means of a fuse. These rockets were fired by soldiers at enemy armies and usually caused panic. In thirteenth-century England an improved form of gunpowder was introduced by Roger Bacon. As a result, rockets were used in battles and were a common—although unreliable—weapon. In the early eighteenth century a twenty-pound rocket that traveled almost two miles was constructed by William Congreve, an English artillery expert. By the late nineteenth century thought was given to supersonic speeds by the physicist Ernst Mach. The sonic boom was predicted by him. The first liquid-fuel rocket was launched by the American Robert Goddard in 1926. A pamphlet written by him anticipated almost all future rocket developments. As a result of his pioneering work, he is called the father of modern rocketry.

\*Exercise from *Exercises to Accompany The Brief Holt Handbook*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.