

Active and Passive Voice, Active and Passive Verbs

What is active voice? What is passive voice?

In writing, verbs can be active or passive. A verb is active when the subject of the sentence performs the action or causes the state or condition. A verb is passive when the subject is being acted upon in a way specified by the verb. Active verbs form active voice, and passive verbs form passive voice.

Consider: *Billy* **fired** the rocket launcher. Vs. *The rocket launcher* **was fired**.

In the first sentence *Billy* is the subject, and he performs an action on the rocket launcher by firing it. Here, **fired** is an active verb, and this is active voice. In the second sentence, *the rocket launcher* is the subject, but it is being acted upon. The rocket launcher **was fired**, but we don't know who performed the action. This is passive voice.

Why does this matter?

Readers prefer active verbs. We tend to speak in active voice, so material written in active voice is generally easier for us to understand. With the subject as the agent of action, the sentence communicates more directly and clearly, and often the writing is more dynamic.

Again: *Billy* **fired** the rocket launcher. Vs. *The rocket launcher* **was fired** by *Billy*.

The sentence in active voice, "Billy fired the rocket launcher," clearly conveys that *Billy* is the subject acting upon the rocket launcher. Adding "by Billy" to our previous example of passive voice conveys the same information, but it requires an extra step for the reader to understand that *Billy* is the person launching the rocket.

How do I know if a verb is passive?

The examples above feature the action verb "fired" and use "was" as a helping verb. This use of a "be" verb (am, is, are, was, were) plus an action verb indicates passive voice. Here's a simple test to help identify passive voice: add the phrase "by zombies" after the verb in a sentence.

Billy fired [by zombies] the rocket launcher. Vs. *The rocket launcher* was fired [by zombies].

Although not very realistic, "The rocket launcher was fired by zombies" does make logical sense as a sentence, and it reveals the use of passive voice.

Is passive voice ever OK?

Yes! But it should be used appropriately. Passive voice is useful when we want to report an action, and the actor's identity is unknown, as in the example, "The chocolate was eaten." Passive voice also helps soften tone. Saying "A mistake was made" (passive voice), instead of "You made a mistake" (active voice), is less harsh.

Some disciplines encourage the use of passive voice and discourage the use of direct personal statements that start with "I." In this case, the passive construction "Measurements were taken" would be preferred over the active "I measured." But even in academic writing, passive voice should not be used to mask uncertainty. If there is indeed a relationship between colors and feelings, for example, write, "Colors influence people's feelings." Do not write, "People's feelings may be influenced by colors" just because it seems to sound more complicated or intelligent. Active voice can strengthen an argument by directly connecting ideas and inferences.

Some tips for using active voice:

- Identify the subject, or actor, in your sentence and put that part of the sentence first.
- Examine where and how you are using helping "be" verbs, with the goal of minimizing their use.
- Restructure your sentences to eliminate the word "by" (which identifies an actor as passive).

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