

# Welcome to the Purdue OWL



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**Contributors:** April Toadvine, Allen Brizee, Elizabeth Angeli.

## **Summary:**

This handout will explain the difference between active and passive voice in writing. It gives examples of both, and shows how to turn a passive sentence into an active one. Also, it explains how to decide when to choose passive voice instead of active.

## Active and Passive Voice

### Using Active Versus Passive Voice

In a sentence using **active voice**, the subject of the sentence performs the action expressed in the verb.

The diagram shows the sentence "The dog bit the boy." with "The dog" in blue, "bit" in black, and "the boy" in purple. A yellow curved arrow points from "The dog" to "the boy", indicating the subject performing the action on the object.

**Image Caption:** The arrow points from the subject performing the action (the dog) to the individual being acted upon (the boy). This is an example of a sentence using the active voice.

The diagram shows the sentence "Scientists have conducted experiments to test the hypothesis." with "Scientists" in blue, "have conducted" in black, and "experiments" in purple. A yellow curved arrow points from "Scientists" to "experiments", indicating the subject performing the action on the object.

**Image Caption:** Sample active voice sentence with the subject performing the action described by the verb.

The diagram shows the sentence "Watching a framed, mobile world through a car's windshield reminds me of watching a movie or TV." with "Watching a framed, mobile world through a car's windshield" in blue, "reminds" in black, and "me" in purple. A yellow curved arrow points from the subject to "me", indicating the subject performing the action on the speaker.

**Image Caption:** The active voice sentence subject (watching a framed, mobile world) performs the action of reminding the speaker of something.

Each example above includes a sentence subject performing the action expressed by the verb.

View [examples](#) of verb tenses active voice.

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## Active Versus Passive Voice

Active voice is used for most non-scientific writing. Using active voice for the majority of your sentences makes your meaning clear for readers, and keeps the sentences from becoming too complicated or wordy. Even in scientific writing, too much use of passive voice can cloud the meaning of your sentences.



The entrance exam *was failed* by over one-third of the applicants to the school.

Image Caption: **The action is performed upon the sentence subject, meaning this sentence is passive (indirect).**



Over one-third of the applicants to the school *failed* the entrance exam.

Image Caption: **This is an example of the active voice because the sentence subject performs the action.**



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

Image Caption: **This is an example of the passive voice.**



She *slammed on* the brakes as the car sped downhill.

Image Caption: **This is an example of an active voice sentence because the sentence subject performs the action.**



Your bicycle *has been damaged*.  
(agent omitted)

Image Caption: **This is an example of the passive voice.**



I have damaged your bicycle.

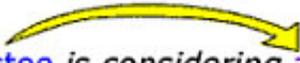
Image Caption: **This is an example of an active voice sentence because its subject performs the action expressed in the verb.**

Sentences in active voice are also more concise than those in passive voice because fewer words are required to express action in active voice than in passive.



Action on the bill is being considered by the committee.

Image Caption: **This passive voice sentence is less concise than its active voice counterpart (shown below).**



The committee is considering action on the bill.

Image Caption: **This active voice sentence requires fewer words to communicate the same idea as the passive voice version (above).**



By then, the soundtrack will have been completely remixed by the sound engineers.

Image Caption: **This passive voice sentence is more wordy than an active voice version.**



By then, the sound engineers will have completely remixed the soundtrack.

Image Caption: **This active voice sentence is more concise than the passive voice version (above) because the subject directly performs the action.**

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# More about Passive Voice

In a sentence using **passive voice**, the subject is acted upon; he or she receives the action expressed by the verb. The agent performing the action may appear in a "by the..." phrase or may be omitted.



The boy *was bitten* by the dog.

Image Caption: **The dog is acting upon the sentence subject (the boy), meaning it uses the passive voice.**



Research *will be presented* by Pooja at the conference.

Image Caption: **This example sentence includes the passive voice because the subject (research) is being acted upon (presented) by another person (Pooja).**



The entrance exam *was failed* by over one-third of the applicants to the school.

Image Caption: **This is an example of the passive voice.**



I am reminded of watching a movie or TV by watching a framed, mobile world through a car's windshield.

Image Caption: **The subject of the passive voice sentence performs the action expressed in the verb in this example.**

## Reasons to Generally Avoid Passive Voice

Sometimes the use of passive voice can create awkward sentences, as in the last example above. Also, overuse of passive voice throughout an essay can cause your prose to seem flat and uninteresting. In scientific writing, however, passive voice is more readily accepted since using it allows one to write without using personal pronouns or the names of particular researchers as the subjects of sentences (see the third example above). This practice helps to create the appearance of an objective, fact-based discourse because writers can present research and conclusions without attributing them to particular agents. Instead, the writing appears to convey information that is not limited or biased by individual perspectives or personal interests.

## Recognizing Passive Voice

You can recognize passive-voice expressions because the verb phrase will always include a

form of 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 they may include a "by the..." phrase after the verb; the agent performing the action, if named, is the object of the preposition in this phrase.

### Helpful Hint

You can recognize passive voice because the verb phrase will include a form of *be* (was, am, are, been, is). Don't assume that just because there is a form of 'be' that the sentence is passive, however. Sometimes a prepositional phrase like "by the" in the sentences above indicates that the action is performed on the subject, and that the sentence is passive.

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## Choosing Passive Voice

### Choosing Passive Voice

While active voice helps to create clear and direct sentences, sometimes writers find using an indirect expression is rhetorically effective in a given situation, so they choose passive voice.

Also, writers in the sciences conventionally use passive voice more often than writers in other discourses. Passive voice makes sense when the agent performing the action is obvious, unimportant, or unknown or when a writer wishes to postpone mentioning the agent until the last part of the sentence or to avoid mentioning the agent at all. The passive voice is effective in such circumstances because it highlights the action and what is acted upon rather than the agent performing the action.

Active	Passive
The dispatcher <i>is notifying</i> police that three prisoners have escaped.	Police <i>are being</i> notified that three prisoners have escaped.
Surgeons successfully <i>performed</i> a new experimental liver-transplant operation yesterday.	A new experimental liver-transplant operation <i>was performed</i> successfully yesterday.
"Authorities <i>make</i> rules to be broken," he said defiantly.	"Rules <i>are made</i> to be broken," he said defiantly.

In each of these examples, the passive voice makes sense because the agent is relatively unimportant compared to the action itself and what is acted upon.

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## Changing Passive to Active Voice

If you want to change a passive-voice sentence to active voice, find the agent in a "by the..." 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. Sometimes you will need to infer the agent from the surrounding sentences which provide context.



The **book** *is being read* by  
most of the class.

Image Caption: **This passive voice contains a by the... phrase. Removing the by the... phrase and reworking the sentence will give it the active voice.**



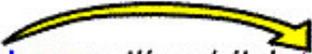
**Most of the class** *is reading* the book.

Image Caption: **Making the agent (most of the class) the subject means this sentence now uses the active voice.**



**Results** *will be published* in  
the next issue of the journal. by ?

Image Caption: **The agent is not explicitly stated, but it is most likely researchers. Making the agent the subject of the sentence will allow you to use the active voice.**



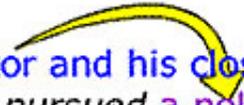
**The researchers** *will publish* their  
results in the next issue of the  
journal.

Image Caption: **This sentence now uses the active voice because the agent (the researchers) are now performing the action as the sentence subject.**



A policy of whitewashing and cover-up *has been pursued* by the CIA director and his close advisors.

Image Caption: **The CIA director and his close advisors are the agent of change in this sentence, but they are not the subject. Making the agent the subject will transform the sentence into a more concise, active voice phrase.**



The CIA director and his close advisors *have pursued* a policy of whitewashing and cover-up.

Image Caption: **This sentence now uses the active voice because the agent (the CIA director and his close advisors) is performing the action as the sentence subject.**



Mistakes *were made*. by ?

Image Caption: **The agent is not specified in this sentence.**



*We made* mistakes.

Image Caption: **This sentence now uses the active voice because the agent (we) is the subject of the sentence.**

If you want to change an active-voice sentence to passive voice, consider carefully who or what is performing the action expressed in the verb, and then make that agent the object of a "by the..." phrase. Make what is acted upon the subject of the sentence, and change the verb to a form of be + past participle. Including an explicit "by the..." phrase is optional.



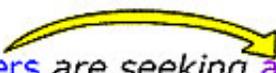
The presiding officer *vetoed*  
the committee's  
recommendation.

Image Caption: This active voice sentence's agent is the presiding officer, which is the subject.



The committee's recommendation  
*was vetoed* by the presiding officer.

Image Caption: Changing the sentence subject from the agent (the presiding officer) to the object of the verb (the committee's recommendation) and adding a by the...phrase transforms the sentence into the passive voice.



The leaders *are seeking* a fair  
resolution to the crisis.

Image Caption: This sentence includes the agent (the leaders) as the subject performing the action of the verb.



A fair resolution to the crisis *is being*  
*sought.* (by the leaders)

Image Caption: This sentence now uses the passive voice because the subject has been changed from the agent (the leaders) to the object of the verb (a fair resolution).



Scientists *have discovered*  
traces of ice on the surface  
of Mars.

Image Caption: The scientists are the agent performing the verb's action in this active voice sentence.

Traces of ice *have been discovered* on the surface of Mars. (by scientists)

Image Caption: This passive voice sentence no longer specifies the agent (scientists) and now uses the passive voice because the verb's object (traces of ice) is now the subject.

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## Further Suggestions for Using Passive and Active Voices

1. Avoid starting a sentence in active voice and then shifting to passive.

Unnecessary shift in voice	Revised
Many customers in the restaurant <i>found</i> the coffee too bitter to drink, but it <i>was</i> still <i>ordered</i> frequently.	Many customers in the restaurant <i>found</i> the coffee too bitter to drink, but they still <i>ordered</i> it frequently.
He <i>tried</i> to act cool when he slipped in the puddle, but he <i>was</i> still <i>laughed at</i> by the other students.	He <i>tried</i> to act cool when he slipped in the puddle, but the other students still <i>laughed at</i> him.

2. Avoid **dangling modifiers** caused by the use of passive voice. A dangling modifier is a word or phrase that modifies a word not clearly stated in the sentence.

Dangling modifier with passive voice	Revised
To save time, the paper <i>was written</i> on a computer. (Who was saving time? The paper?)	To save time, Kristin <i>wrote</i> the paper on a computer.
Seeking to lay off workers without taking the blame, consultants <i>were hired</i> to break the bad news. Who was seeking to lay off workers? The consultants?)	Seeking to lay off workers without taking the blame, the CEO <i>hired</i> consultants to break the bad news.

3. Don't trust the grammar-checking programs in word-processing software. Many grammar checkers flag all passive constructions, but you may want to keep some that are flagged. Trust your judgment, or ask another human being for their opinion about which sentence sounds best.

The **Paramedic Method** is an effective process for helping eliminate passive voice.

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# Verbs: Voice and Mood

## Active and Passive Voice

Verbs in the active voice show the subject acting. Verbs in the passive voice show something else acting on the subject. Most writers consider the active voice more forceful and tend to stay away from passives unless they really need them.

**ACTIVE:** Tim killed the chicken hawk.

**PASSIVE:** The chicken hawk was killed by Tim.

Check out [our handout on active and passive verbs](#).

## Indicative, Imperative, and Subjunctive Mood

Most verbs we use are in the **indicative mood**, which indicates a fact or opinion:

**Examples:**

- He was here.
- I am hungry.
- She will bring her books.

Some verbs are in the **imperative mood**, which expresses commands or requests. Though it is not stated, the understood subject of imperative sentences is you.

**Examples:**

- Be here at seven o'clock. (Understood: **You** be here at seven o'clock.)
- Cook me an omelette. (Understood: **You** cook me an omelette.)
- Bring your books with you. (Understood: **You** bring your books with you.)

When verbs show something contrary to fact, they are in the **subjunctive mood**.

When you express a wish or something that is not actually true, use the past tense or past perfect tense; when using the verb 'to be' in the subjunctive, always use were rather than was:

**Examples:**

- If he were here... (Implied: ...but he's not.)
- I wish I had something to eat. (Implied: ...but I don't.)
- It would be better if you had brought your books with you. (Implied: ...but you haven't)

brought them.)

## Review

**INDICATIVE:** I need some help.

**IMPERATIVE:** Help me!

**SUBJUNCTIVE:** If I were smart, I'd call for help.

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# Active/Passive Voice Classroom Poster

This resource contains links to classroom mini-posters that address active and passive voice. Our posters are available in two sizes, 22x15 inches and 8.5x11. Please click the appropriate links to download the poster of your choosing.

To access a folder-sized (8.5x11) handout explaining active versus passive voice, click [here](#).

To access a small poster-sized handout explaining active versus passive voice, click [here](#).

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