



OWLS Writing Guides:

VERBS: ACTIVE & PASSIVE VOICE

WHAT IS GRAMMATICAL VOICE? *Active and passive voice* refers to whether the subject of a sentence is the doer of the action in the sentence or the receiver of that action. In any sentence, the action is expressed by the verb, so we talk of active and passive verbs, or active and passive sentences.

An **active-voice sentence** is one in which the subject is the doer of the action expressed by the verb:

Subject (doer/actor)	active verb	object of verb (receiver of the action)
<i>Amy</i>	<i>dropped</i>	<i>the vase.</i>

In most cases, use active sentences. They are clear, direct, and concise. They keep your subject front and center by focusing on the doer of the action, and they make your writing more vigorous, more active.

A **passive-voice sentence** is one in which the subject is the receiver of the action expressed by the verb:

Subject (receiver of action)	passive verb (helping verb + past participle of a transitive verb)
<i>The vase</i>	<i>was dropped.</i>

In a **passive-voice sentence**, the doer of the action (if named) appears in a prepositional phrase beginning with *by*.

Subject (Receiver of action)	passive verb	preposition by	object of prep. (Actor/Doer)
<i>The vase</i>	<i>was dropped</i>	<i>by</i>	<i>Amy.</i>

TIP FOR IDENTIFYING PASSIVE VOICE AND CONVERTING PASSIVE SENTENCES TO ACTIVE ONES:

Circle all forms of the verb *be*: *is, am, was, are, were, being, been*. Finding these verbs may point you toward weak passive constructions. *Bill is kicked by Jim.* (Passive voice)

Identify what is happening in the sentence and who is doing it—the action and the doer of the action. In this case, who is kicking whom? *Jim is kicking Bill.*

Make the doer into the subject of the sentence, and express the action with an active verb:
Jim kicks Bill. (Notice this sentence is more concise and direct.)

Note: Use passive voice when the doer is either unknown or unimportant, or the writer wishes to put the focus on the receiver of the action—in this case the victim!—not on the doer:
Bill was kicked in the shins during the scuffle.

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES:

Passive sentences	Active sentences
The play <i>was enjoyed</i> by most of the parents.	Most of the parents <i>enjoyed</i> the play.
Sales figures <i>are checked</i> by the accounting department weekly.	The accounting department <i>checks</i> sales figures weekly.

The rider <i>was thrown</i> over the fence by the horse.	The horse <i>threw</i> the rider over the fence.
My paper <i>was eaten</i> by my dog.	The dog <i>ate</i> my paper.
The Vikings <i>were defeated</i> by the Saints.	The Saints <i>defeated</i> the Vikings.
Elections <i>are often determined</i> by a small number of voters.	A small number of voters often <i>determine</i> elections.

BOLO! Avoid unnecessary shifts between active and passive voice, as this shift usually results in awkward and unclear writing:

Shifts from active to passive voice:	Maintains active voice throughout sentence:
Each student <i>completes</i> a self-assessment. The self-assessment <i>is</i> then <i>given</i> to the teacher, and a copy <i>is exchanged</i> with a classmate.	Each student <i>completes</i> a self-assessment, <i>gives</i> it to the teacher, and <i>exchanges</i> a copy with a classmate.

Is it wrong to use passive voice? Using the passive voice is never grammatically wrong, but it can create ineffective, unclear, and wordy sentences. By nature, passive-voice sentences are less direct, less emphatic, and wordier than active-voice sentences. They focus on the receiver of the action, not the doer, and they use more words to do so. For this reason, you should use active voice most of the time.

When is it OK to use passive voice? Using passive voice is preferable and even necessary, such as in these situations:

- When you want to emphasize the receiver of the action rather than the doer: *Coastal residents were forced to move inland in advance of the oncoming tsunami.*
- When the doer is unknown: *The jewels were stolen during the night.*
- When the doer is known but naming the doer is unimportant, unnecessary, and wordy: *Smoking is not permitted in the theater.* (It's understood that theater management prohibits smoking.)
- When the writer wishes to avoid naming the doer: *The unpopular legislation was passed last term.*
- When the idea can be expressed only by using the passive voice: *She was born in 1959. The cafeteria is located in the middle of campus.*
- In much scientific writing, when the action and the receiver of the action are more important than the doer of the action: *After the specimens were collected, several slides were prepared and placed under the microscope.*