

All sentences that contain action verbs have voice, either **active** or **passive**. The voice tells the reader whether the subject performs or receives the verb's action.

IDENTIFYING ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE

ACTIVE VOICE

In sentences with active voice, the **agent** or doer of the action is the subject. The **receiver** takes the action of the verb. Active sentences follow the **Agent—Verb—Receiver** format.

EXAMPLE: Molly (agent/ subject) cashed (verb) her check (receiver) at the bank.

PASSIVE VOICE

In passive voice sentences, the **receiver** of the verb's action becomes the subject of the sentence. Sentences that use passive voice include a form of the verb *to be* and the past participle of the main verb. They follow the **Receiver—Verb—by Agent** format or leave out the agent.

EXAMPLES: The check (receiver/ subject) was cashed (verb) by Molly (agent) at the bank.
The check (receiver/ subject) was cashed (verb) at the bank. (no agent)

CHOOSING BETWEEN ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE

CHOOSING ACTIVE VOICE

Use active voice in most writing because it engages the reader more effectively than passive voice.

- ◀ Active voice is direct.

ACTIVE: John **asked** Teresa to dinner.

PASSIVE: Teresa **was asked** to dinner by John.

- ◀ Verbs in the active voice are more forceful and lively because they put more emphasis on the doer of the action.

ACTIVE: The batter **strikes** the ball with the bat.

PASSIVE: The ball **is struck** by the batter with the bat.

CHOOSING PASSIVE VOICE

In general, use passive voice sparingly. Overuse can make writing seem flat, uninteresting, and confusing because it is often unclear who is performing the action. However, passive voice may be used in cases such as the following:

- ◀ When emphasizing the receiver is more important than emphasizing the agent of the action

PASSIVE: The president **was elected** three years ago.

ACTIVE: Voters **elected** the president three years ago.

- ◀ When the agent is unknown

PASSIVE: The money **was stolen** last night.

ACTIVE: Someone **stole** the money last night.

- ◀ When your discipline uses it as part of its discourse in order to make writing appear objective and fact-based. Scientists often use passive voice because the process or result is more important than the researcher conducting the experiment. Business writing also calls for passive voice to remove blame and to appear tactful.

PASSIVE: The check **was mailed** late.

ACTIVE: I **mailed** the check late.

TRANSFORMING PASSIVE SENTENCES INTO ACTIVE SENTENCES

You can transform passive voice to active voice by rearranging the format to follow the **Agent—Verb—Receiver** format. The following steps show how to transform a sentence.

EXAMPLE: The ice cream cones (receiver/ subject) were eaten (verb) by the children (agent).

STEP NUMBER ONE:

Make the agent in the *by* phrase the subject of the active sentence. Eliminate the word *by* if necessary.

| PASSIVE | ACTIVE |
|---|-------------------------|
| The ice cream cones were eaten by the children . | The children ... |

STEP NUMBER TWO:

Remove the form of the *to be* verb from the sentence. Change the past participle into the appropriate tense. To determine the tense of the verb, look at the tense of the *to be* verb in the passive sentence.

| PASSIVE | ACTIVE |
|--|-----------------------------|
| The ice cream cones were eaten by the children. | The children ate ... |

STEP NUMBER THREE:

Make the subject of the passive sentence the receiver of the active sentence.

| PASSIVE | ACTIVE |
|--|---|
| The ice cream cones were eaten by the children. | The children ate the ice cream cones . |

TRANSFORMING ACTIVE SENTENCES INTO PASSIVE SENTENCES

You can change active voice sentences into passive voice by reversing the steps listed above.

1. Make the receiver of the active sentence the subject of the passive voice sentence.
2. Transform the verb into a form of *to be* plus the past participle of the main verb.
3. Put the subject/ agent of the active sentence into a *by* phrase or omit it.

A FEW CAUTIONS

- ◀ If your original sentence contains a modifying phrase or a phrase that describes a specific element in the sentence, make sure you keep the phrase next to that element when you change from active to passive voice. If the phrase is left in the wrong spot, the sentence may be unclear.

EXAMPLE: The ice cream cones **from the store** were eaten by the children.

INCORRECT: The children **from the store** ate the ice cream cones. (describes *the children*)

CORRECT: The children ate the ice cream cones **from the store**. (describes *ice cream cones*)

- ◀ Avoid shifting from active to passive voice in the same sentence because it can cause awkwardness and confusion.

INCORRECT: The children **ate** the ice cream, but it **was bought** by Peter. (voice shifts)

CORRECT: The children **ate** the ice cream, but Peter **bought** it. (voice is consistent)