



ETAP 550
Active vs. Passive Voice
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Understanding Sentence Structure

The scientist ***filled*** test tubes.



- ★ Filled is the main **verb** in this sentence.
- ★ The scientist is the **subject** of the sentence. He or she is the one doing the filling (performing the action).
- ★ The test tubes are the **object** of the sentence. They are not performing an action, they are being acted upon.

Subject, Verb, Object

Let's try to identify subject, verb, and object in these sentences.

★ Note: Not all sentences have objects.

1. The small alien hopped on the ground.
2. Pasta was eaten at dinner time.
3. The clothes were washed by Padma.
4. He will write an essay for class.



Let's Find the subjects, the verbs and the objects.

Subject, **verb**, object

1. The small alien **hopped** on the ground.
2. Pasta **was eaten** at dinner time.
3. The clothes **were washed** by Padma.
4. He **will write** an essay for class.

This is essentially the difference between active and passive voice.

There are two types of voices:
Active and Passive

Passive voice:

If the subject receives the action of the verb, then the sentence is in passive voice.

Active Voice:

If the subject does (performs) the action of the verb, the sentence is in active voice.



Active Voice	Passive Voice
Tells what a person or things does. The subject performs the action on the object	Tells us what is done to someone or something. The subject is being acted upon.
Subject, Verb, Object	Object, Verb, Subject.



Passive Sentences and Auxiliary verb

“Am / Are / Is” + past verb tense – *The dog is walked by his owner.*

“Am / Are / Is being” + past verb tense – *The dogs are being walked by their owners.*

“Was / Were” + past verb tense – *The dog was walked by his owner.*

“Was / Were being” + past verb tense – *The dogs were being walked by their owners.*

“Will be” + past verb tense – *The dog will be walked by its owner.*

“Will have been” + past verb tense – *The dog will have been walked by its owner.*

“Have / Has been” + past verb tense – *The dog has been walked by its owner.*

“Had been” + past verb tense – *The dog had been walked by its owner.*

‘To be’ and past tense of main verb

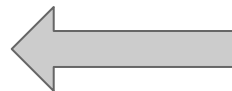


Chart taken from:
<https://blog.reedsy.com/passive-voice-active/>



Active Sentences

In active sentences, the subject of the sentence performs the action, and the object of the sentence is what is being acted upon.

The alien is eating pizza.

In this sentence the alien is the subject of the sentence and he is performing the action of eating.



Passive Sentences

In passive sentences, the thing being acted upon is the subject of the sentence and the thing doing the action is optionally included in the end.

The pizza is being eaten by the alien.

In this sentence “The pizza” is the subject of the sentence and it being acted upon (being eaten). It is a passive sentence.



Passive

Brains

were eaten

by zombies.

The subject is
passive or is acted
upon

Active

Zombies

ate

the brains.



The subject is the “doer” of
the action

Passive or Active Voice Activity

Decide if each sentence is in the active or passive voice.

1. The aliens are going to the soccer game tomorrow.



2. The city was built by the advanced aliens.



3. The aliens sent their letter to the president.



4. Stories were told to the students by the alien.



The following are more complicated sentences.

The piano was played.

Ask yourself, “What is the subject?”
Is it performing the action of being played? Nope

So then it is passive voice.

It doesn't matter that we don't know who is doing the playing here.



Shut the window.

What is the subject?



Success Criteria for identifying active or passive voice

- Find the main verb (finite verb) in the sentence
- Find the subject and identify

Is the subject being acted upon? Then it is passive.

Is the subject performing the action? Then it is active.

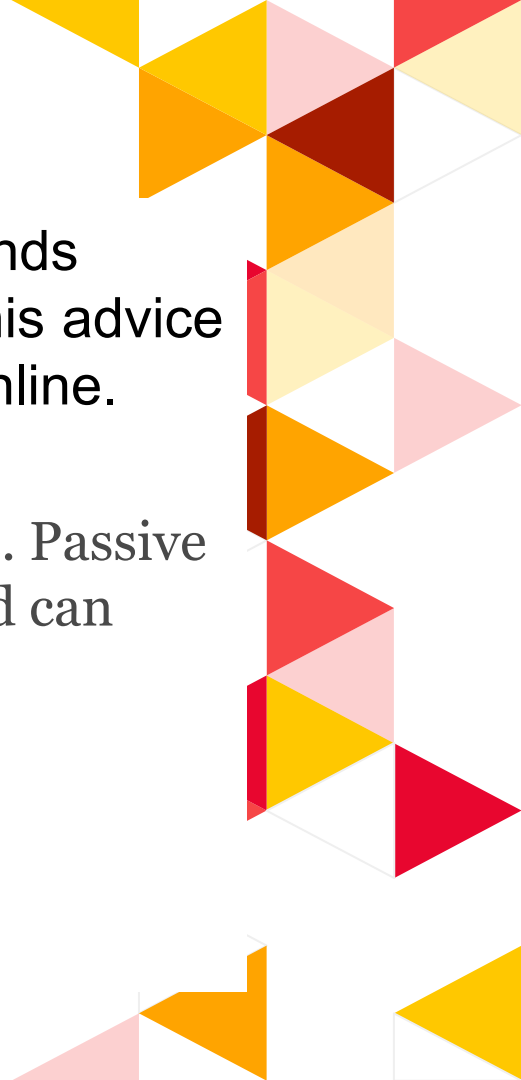


When to use active and passive voice

Passive Voice has a bad rap. People may think it sounds clunky, clumsy, and fails to come to a point. Look at this advice given by the University of Wisconsin Writing Center Online.

“Generally, try to use the active voice whenever possible. Passive voice sentences often use more words, can be vague, and can lead to a tangle of prepositional phrases.”

However, passive tense does have its place.



Grammarly claims, you can use passive voice creatively to...

★ “Avoid getting blamed”

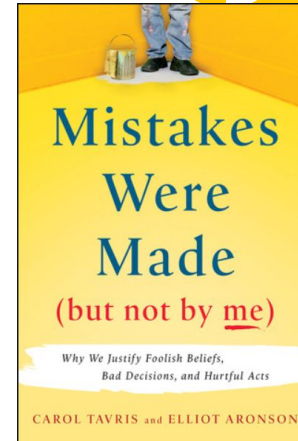
For example, “mistakes were made”

★ “To make a reader pay more attention to something” You may want to place emphasis on different parts of a sentence.

For example...

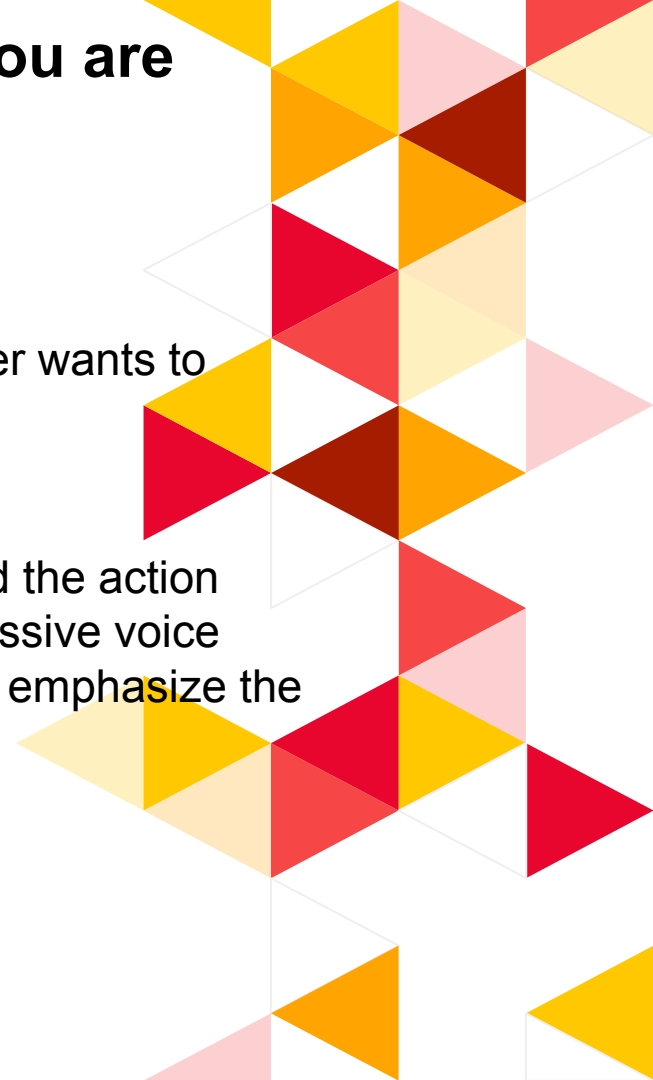
Detroit Revealed as Most Dangerous City

The choice of passive tense was chosen to emphasize Detroit



Passive voice may be your best choice if you are writing a ...

- ★ Scientific text
The monkey was tested on knowledge of language.
(The scientists did the testing but that is not what the writer wants to emphasize)
- ★ Crime reports.
The passive voice emphasizes the object of the crime and the action (theft, larceny, etc.) not who did it. Writers may choose passive voice because they may not know yet who did it or they want to emphasize the crime.
The house was broken into on March 5th at 8am.
(emphasis is placed on the crime and not who did it)
- ★ General truth
“Rules are made for breaking.”



When to use passive voice in other writing..

1. When you don't know who did an action
2. When who did the action isn't important.
3. When you want the reader to focus on the object of the action.
4. Stylistically you just like passive voice.



Passive Voice in Great Literature

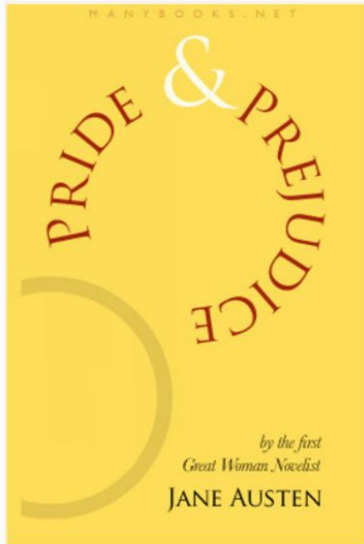
Why do you think passive voice works here?

- “Scarlet O'Hara was not beautiful, but men seldom realized it when caught by her charm as the Tarleton twins were.” — *Gone With The Wind* by Margaret Mitchell

(The action “caught by her charm” is happening to a subject “the Tarleton twins.”)

Jane Austen cleverly used passive voice in her novels.

“However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.” -Pride and Prejudice
There is no specific subject of the thought; the sentence makes it seem like what is being said is a universal truth. It’s obviously meant to be humorous.



Pride and Prejudice

by Jane Austen

(about 487 pages)

121,737

TOTAL WORDS

85th PERCENTILE
of all the books in our library

12.55%

VIVIDNESS

0th PERCENTILE
of all the books in our library

9.49%

PASSIVE VOICE

87th PERCENTILE
of all the books in our library

4.33%

ALL ADVERBS

98th PERCENTILE
of all the books in our library

1.40%

LY-ADVERBS

87th PERCENTILE
of all the books in our library

2.93%

NON-LY-ADVERBS

99th PERCENTILE
of all the books in our library

From <http://prosecraft.io/library/jane-austen/pride-and-prejudice/>

People often say as a general rule, it is better to write with an active voice. It makes your writing seem more concise, clear, and to the point. Use of active voice often pulls in readers.



Active Voice used in Literature...

Why does it work?

- “I am an invisible Man.” *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison
- “Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything truly wrong, he was arrested.”
The Trial by Franz Kafka



In conclusion both active voice and passive voice are grammatically correct. There are some things to beware of when using passive voice, and some instances in which passive voice may be the better choice. However, it is widely acknowledged that active voice is more to the point, concise, pulls a reader in, and is generally the better choice in most instances.



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