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### **Active and passive voice**

Take a sentence like “I want ice cream now.” It’s clear and straightforward—you know immediately that the subject, I, wants an object, ice cream. Now, recast this sentence, flipping it so that the object is in the position of the subject: “Ice cream is wanted by me now.” It isn’t just longer, but it’s also more detached, roundabout, and a little awkward, too.

Those two sentences are examples of the active voice and the passive voice. Certain kinds of writing are best suited for the active voice, while the passive voice is most appropriate for other kinds of writing. Understanding how, when, and why to use each is key to being an effective writer and speaker.

#### **What is active voice, what is passive voice, and what are their different functions?**

In the active voice, the subject is performing an action:

The dog chases the ball.

Notice how the subject, dog, is performing the action, chase, on the target of the action, ball. This is a simple, direct example of the active voice.

In the passive voice, the action’s target, ball, is positioned first as the focus of the sentence. The sentence gets flipped, and the subject is now being acted upon by the verb. In other words, the subject is passive:

The ball is being chased by the dog.

Active and passive are the two grammatical voices in English. Neither is inherently better than the other, but each is suited to certain types of writing. There’s a reason why news anchors sound detached from the stories they’re reporting: They often speak using the passive voice. There’s also a reason why the authors of opinion pieces sound so sure of their positions: They usually write in the active voice.

Although the idea of teachers telling their students to avoid the passive voice is repeated so frequently that it feels like a trope, the truth is that the passive voice does have its applications. We’ll get into those later. For now, let’s look at how to recognize the active voice and the passive voice in your writing and in others’ work.

#### **Active voice**

As we’ve learned, in the active voice, the sentence’s subject performs the action. Here are two examples of sentences in the active voice:

Shira likes birdwatching.

She loves twilight.

No matter what verb you use, structuring your sentence so the subject performs the verb is writing in the active voice.

The active voice has a direct, clear tone. Use it when you want the reader to focus on the subject of your sentence and the action it is doing rather than on the action's target.

### **Passive voice**

In the passive voice, the action's target is the focus, and the verb acts upon the subject. Or, to put it in the passive voice, the subject is acted upon by the verb. Every sentence in the passive voice contains two verbs:

A conjugated form of "to be"

The main verb's past participle

Take a look at the previous examples, now written in passive voice:

Birdwatching is liked by Shira.

Twilight is loved by her.

Notice how the targets of the action—also the direct objects of the sentences—are now the focus. The sentences now contain a conjugated form of "to be" (is) and the main verb's past participle (liked and loved). Often, sentences in the passive voice are longer than sentences in the active voice simply because they have to include additional words like prepositions. Take a look at this sentence in the passive voice:

Summer break is [conjugated form of "to be"] loved [past participle of the main verb] by [preposition] my friends.

However, sentences written in the passive voice don't necessarily need a preposition. Take a look at the example sentences below:

The check was paid.

He will be remembered.

The Philippines is known for its marine biodiversity.

The passive voice has a subtler tone than the active voice has. Sometimes your writing needs this tone, like when you want your reader to focus on the action being described or the action's

target rather than on who or what is performing the action. This is why the passive voice is used in lab reports—it conveys scientific objectivity by minimizing the focus on the doer of the action.

In certain kinds of writing, though, the passive voice is necessary. Think about how news reports about crime and incidents are usually written and delivered:

A car was broken into on Elm Street last night.

Cash was stolen from the register.

In these kinds of reports, the passive voice is used to emphasize the action that occurred rather than the individual or group who committed the action, often because the perpetrator isn't known or hasn't yet been found guilty of the offense.

There are other kinds of writing where the action itself, rather than the doer of the action, is the primary focus. These include scientific and, in some cases, historical reports. These use the passive voice to keep the reader's focus on what has happened or is happening. Here are a few examples:

The rats were placed into the maze.

The governor was inaugurated at the statehouse.

Notice how in both of these sentences, the doer of the action isn't mentioned. That's because it's either implied or irrelevant. In the first example, the scientist performing the experiment is the one who placed the rats in the maze. In the second, those conducting the inauguration ceremony aren't relevant to what's being expressed in the sentence.

### **Active and passive voice examples**

Take a look at these examples of both the active and passive voices in action:

Active: Is Ajani visiting us today?

Passive: Will we be visited by Ajani today?

As you see, questions can be written in either voice. Other kinds of sentences, like exclamatory and imperative sentences, are often best written in the active voice:

Active: Please remove your shoes before entering my house.

Passive: Shoes should be removed before entering my house.

Active: Lock the door!

Passive: Let the door be locked!

See how with the first pair, the passive voice makes the request feel more like a suggestion? In the second pair, the passive voice makes the message sound stilted and formal rather than an urgent exclamation.

Now take a look at these two examples:

Active: I poured the solution into the beaker and heated it to 100°F.

Passive: The solution was poured into the beaker and heated to 100°F.