

## ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE

### IDENTIFYING ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE

In English, sentences can be either active or passive. In active voice, the actor is the subject of the sentence and comes before the verb. In passive voice, the actor is not the subject of the sentence and comes after the verb. Locating who or what is performing the action of the verb can be the key to identifying if a sentence is in active or passive voice. Sometimes the actor can be completely absent in a passive voice sentence. Below are some examples of active and passive sentences.

#### Active voice:

My dentist removed my wisdom teeth.

Here the subject (my dentist) is performing the action in the sentence (removing wisdom teeth).

#### Passive voice:

My wisdom teeth were removed by my dentist.

In this example, the actor (my dentist) comes after the verb or action (were removed).

My wisdom teeth were removed.

In this sentence, the actor (my dentist) is completely absent. Notice too that in both passive sentences the verb changed. Typical passive sentences will use some version of the verb “to be,” such as were or was, with the past participle (-ed ending) of a simple tense verb.

In academic writing, **active voice is generally preferred**. However, there are some contexts when you can use passive voice.

### WHEN SHOULD YOU USE PASSIVE VOICE?

1. When writing a scientific paper that traditionally uses passive voice, especially Materials and Methods section of a lab report:

The experiment was performed outdoors at UNLV. Bugs were collected from the Reserve on the morning of the testing day.

2. When the subject is unknown or not relevant.

The painting was found during an excavation.

**We don't know who found the painting.**

New research will be conducted on the efficacy of waste management.

**It's not relevant or important who is conducting this research.**

#### CONTACT US:

(702) 895-3908 | [writingcenter@unlv.edu](mailto:writingcenter@unlv.edu)  
[unlv.edu/writing-center](http://unlv.edu/writing-center)



3. When you wish to emphasize the person or thing acted on.

The Americas were discovered in 1492.

**We are emphasizing the discovery of the Americas**

4. When talking about books, plays, artwork, and other published materials.

*One Hundred Years of Solitude* was written by Gabriel García Márquez.

*The Godfather* was directed by Francis Ford Coppola.

## WHEN SHOULD YOU AVOID PASSIVE VOICE?

You may want to change a passive sentence to active voice when the sentence is vague about who is responsible for an action, causing confusion.

Both Othello and Iago desire Desdemona. She is courted.

**Who courts Desdemona? Othello? Iago? Both of them?**

Research has been done to prove the efficacy of COVID-19 vaccine.

**Who did this research? You? Another author?**

Because passive voice can be indirect and wordy, convert to active voice to be direct and concise.

Since the damage was done by Michael while driving my car, he should pay me.

**You could simply say: Michael damaged my car while driving so, he should pay me.**

## TO CONVERT PASSIVE TO ACTIVE

1. Look for who or what is performing the action expressed by the verb. The phrase “by \_\_\_\_\_,” often contains the actor.
2. Make that actor the subject of your sentence and change the verb accordingly.
3. Sometimes the actor is unknown, and you will need to infer who performs the action through context. If the actor cannot be inferred, the sentence may need to remain in passive voice.

The book was borrowed by Paul. Paul borrowed the book.

In this example, the passive sentence has an actor [Paul] for the verb “borrowed.” To change from passive to active, we placed Paul at the beginning of the sentence and removed “was.”

New data has been found on Martian atmosphere. Scientists have found new data on Martian atmosphere.

Here, it is not stated who found new data. We infer that “scientists” is the actor and placed it at the beginning of the sentence. We can infer “scientists” as the actor because they typically research and find such data.