

Writing in the Active Voice

- Active voice refers to a sentence where the subject performs the action by using active verbs.
- “Active verbs express meaning more emphatically and vigorously than their weaker counterparts—forms of the verb be or verbs in the passive voice. Verbs in the passive voice lack strength because their subjects receive the action instead of doing it.”¹
- Passive voice occurs when a “to-be” verb is paired with a past tense verb.
- **Passive voice:** The **ball was hit** by John
 - **Subject** = “The ball” **Verb** = “was hit”
- **Active Voice:** **John hit** the ball.
 - **Subject** = “John” **Verb** = “hit”

The active sentence communicates the idea of the sentence more clearly and directly than the passive sentence. Unless there is a purposeful reason for using the passive voice, writers should mainly use the active voice in academic writing

Revising Passive Voice

There are a number of steps writers can follow to turn passive sentences into active sentences.

Student success is prioritized at the Regent University Writing Center.

1. Who is the main character of this story? First, the writer should find the character who relates to the action of the sentence and make sure it is the subject of the sentence. Subjects tend to go at the beginning of the sentence.

Student Success is prioritized at the Regent University Writing Center.

“Student Success” is the subject, but “Regent University Writing Center” is the main character. Turn that into a *flesh and blood character* → Regent University writing **coaches**

2. Where is the action? If the verb contains a “to-be” verb paired with a past tense verb, it is in passive voice. Instead, choose an active verb and pair it with the new flesh and blood character.

Student Success is prioritize at the Regent University Writing Center.

Turn this passive tense (“is prioritized”) into an active tense → **prioritize**

3. Pair the active verb with the flesh and blood subject.

Regent University writing coaches prioritize student success.

The sentence above now has a flesh and blood subject carrying out an active verb. It clearly explains who (Regent University writing coaches) does (prioritize) what (student success).

NOTE: When revising, writers can discover that the new, active verb does not convey the same meaning they intended. Sometimes, there is a stronger active verb hiding somewhere else in the sentence disguised as an adjective or a noun. In those cases, turn the adjective or noun into an active verb and pair with the flesh and blood subject to revise.

1. Diana Hacker, *A Writer's Reference*, 5th ed. (New York, NY: St. Bedford, 2009), 128-130.