

WRITING IN THE ACTIVE VOICE

Active Voice occurs when a clear **subject** performs a clear **action** on an **object**. The “doer” of the action is the subject of the sentence.

“Verbs in the passive voice lack strength because their subjects receive the action instead of doing it.”¹

In contrast, Passive Voice occurs when the **object** of an action becomes the **subject** of the sentence. Passive constructions focus on *the thing being acted on* rather than *the one doing the action*. A form of the verb “to be” (am, are, is, was, were, be, being, been) followed by a past-tense verb often signals passive voice.

Active Voice is considered clearer than Passive Voice and is preferred in academic writing.

HOW TO IDENTIFY AND REVISE PASSIVE VOICE

1. **Identify passive voice** – Locate the verb that states the main action of the sentence. If the subject of the sentence is not *doing* the main action, but instead having the main action *done to* it, then the sentence is passive. Additionally, if the main verb is a form of the verb “to be” (am, are, is, was, were, be, being, been) followed by a past-tense verb, the sentence is most likely in passive voice.
2. **Determine the “doer”** – Ask yourself, “Who is doing the action?” Whoever or whatever is doing the action should become the new subject of the sentence. If a “doer” can’t be found in the sentence, use context to determine who or what it is.
3. **Rearrange your sentence** – Move your new subject and verb to the beginning of the sentence and move the object (who or what the action is being *done to*) to the end of the sentence. Review the rest of the sentence for clarity.

NOTE: Sometimes, you may need a new verb for your sentence to work.

EXAMPLES

Passive voice: The ball was thrown across the room by John.

1. **Find the action verb:** The ball was thrown across the room by John.
2. **Decide who or what does the action:** The ball was thrown across the room *by John*.

NOTE: Often, the word “by” will hint at who or what does the action!

3. **Rearrange your sentence:** *John* threw the ball across the room

Passive voice: The runaway cat was found in the woods the next day.

1. **Find the action verb:** The runaway cat was found in the woods the next day.
2. **Decide who or what does the action:** The sentence above **does not** explicitly mention who found the cat. Ask yourself, “Who/what is doing the action?” (e.g., “Who/what found the cat?”)
3. **Rearrange your sentence:** *A park ranger* found the runaway cat in the woods the next day.

A FEW EXCEPTIONS FOR WRITING IN THE PASSIVE VOICE

You may *intentionally* write in the passive voice. Possible reasons include (but are not limited to) the following:

1. **For Emphasis:** You may choose to use the passive voice in order to emphasize the noun being acted upon.

Ex. Fracking was debated heavily in the caucus. (Passive Voice)

2. **Emphasizing Familiarity:** If you write a research paper with unfamiliar subject matter, you may start a sentence with terms the audience already knows:

Ex. Water can be processed through filtration, reverse osmosis, and other methods.
(Passive Voice)

3. **Obscuring Information:** You may use the passive voice if your goal is to intentionally obscure information, especially in creative writing. This example uses the passive voice to hide the thief’s identity:

Ex. The diamond necklace was stolen in the night. (Passive Voice)

However, in academic writing, you should still prefer the active voice for clarity and concision whenever possible.

PRACTICE NOW

1. Diana Hacker and Nancy Sommers, *A Writer’s Reference*, 7th ed. (Bedford / St. Martin’s, 2011), 156.