

Active & Passive Voice

Even when the mechanics of writing are correct—subjects, predicates, and punctuation—writing may still be awkward, vague, or wordy. Sometimes *passive voice* contributes to awkwardness, and revising to *active voice* can help. Writing in active voice makes your writing more direct, concise, and clear.

Active voice is direct & vivid

We tend to focus on the subject of a sentence. In an active voice sentence, the subject of the sentence is also the doer of the action:

Zombies ate my homework.
(doer/subject → action → receiver)

American English prefers directness, so in English, *doer/subject → action → receiver* is the preferred word order, and this is what we have above. The zombies did it. They ate my homework. The sentence leads with the active agent (*zombies*), the active voice verb is direct and easy to visualize, and the receiver of the action (direct object) follows. In these examples of active voice, doer/subjects are emphasized:

<i>He knows me already.</i>	<i>A hoodlum stole my bike.</i>
<i>Local craftsmen made the shoes.</i>	<i>Twelve guests will share the meal.</i>
<i>Union workers built the bridge.</i>	<i>An intruder might have broken the window.</i>
<i>A loud boom waked him.</i>	

Passive voice is weaker than active voice

Passive voice, on the other hand, sort of flips the preferred word order, making the *receiver* of the action the subject of the sentence. The *doer* of the action (and, in this case, the most vivid image—brain-eating Zombies!) is pushed away and demoted to a lowly prepositional phrase tacked on at the end:

My homework was eaten by Zombies.
(receiver/subject ← action + doer)

Of course, in order to reverse the positions of the doer and the receiver, we had to revise the verb from *ate* to *was eaten*. This is how you recognize a passive voice verb: a *be* verb (in this case *was*) + a past participle verb (in this case, *eaten*). The Zombies still did it, but their agency is downplayed and their impact in the sentence lessened. The result is a weaker, less vivid sentence. Here are other examples of passive voice constructions:

Be verb	+ Past participle verb	Sentence
<i>am</i>	<i>known</i>	<i>I am already known to him.</i>
<i>are</i>	<i>made</i>	<i>The shoes are made by local craftsmen.</i>
<i>was</i>	<i>built</i>	<i>The bridge was built by union workers.</i>
<i>had been</i>	<i>waked (or woken)</i>	<i>He had been waked by a loud boom.</i>
<i>was</i>	<i>stolen</i>	<i>My bike was stolen.</i>
<i>will be</i>	<i>shared</i>	<i>The meal will be shared by twelve guests.</i>
<i>might have been</i>	<i>broken</i>	<i>The window might have been broken by an intruder.</i>

Note: The progressive tense (*is making*) is *not* passive voice. Perfect tenses (*had or has broken*) are *not* passive voice.

Passive voice is roundabout, vague, and evasive

Passive voice is more roundabout, partly because of the reversal of actor/receiver and partly because it just uses more words. A couple extra words may not seem like a big deal, but over the length of an entire paper or article it adds up, and we have to use up mental bandwidth decoding the action reversals and the extra words and phrases. Moreover, passive constructions become vague when they drop the doer of the action out completely:

My homework was destroyed.

My homework was destroyed...by whom? Expressions like these seem evasive, as if the writer is hiding something or dodging responsibility. In fact, if you have had many auto accidents, you may get a passive-voice notice like one of these from your insurance company:

Your policy will not be renewed [by whom?].

In a notice like this the company chooses not to acknowledge that their managers or underwriters have made a deliberate decision not to renew your policy. It will probably not say, *Allstate will not renew your policy* or, worse, *Allstate is cancelling your policy*. The passive voice gives the impression that Allstate is not responsible for this matter but that it is due to circumstances beyond their control.

Further confusion can result when the convoluted nature of passive constructions results in misplaced modifiers:

Trying to cut payroll costs, two custodial crews were laid off.

What happened here? Well, someone made a decision to lay off two custodial crews. That person does not appear in the sentence. Yet, the modifier, *trying to cut payroll costs*, should modify whoever is responsible, perhaps *Rideout Hospital or administrators*. Instead, the modifier just floats there, looking for something else to attach to. The modifier attaches to the custodial crews because there is nothing else for it properly to attach to, and the idea becomes awkward and ambiguous.

Passive voice is okay sometimes

You may rightly choose passive voice over active if you have justification. Sometimes the doer is *not* the most important thing in the sentence:

*A two-thirds majority is required to override the veto.
Her twin girls were delivered yesterday at 11 a.m.*

Here, a change to active voice may not be an improvement. *Congressional rules require a two-thirds majority to override the veto* is also grammatically correct, but it shifts attention away from the quantity of votes needed—possibly not what the writer wished. *Dr. Shumway delivered her twin girls yesterday at 11 a.m.* is, likewise, correct active voice, but most of those who hear this news really only care about the twins, not about Dr. Shumway.

Scientific disciplines often use passive voice because in research, the results matter more than those who did the research, and passive voice seems unbiased and objective. However, even the American Psychological Association (APA) is starting to favor active voice constructions because they are clearer and easier to read.

Contributed by Rosemary McKeever



This Yuba College Writing & Language Development Center Tip Sheet is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>