

## #20) Passive Voice

(Used with permission from Oregon State University's Business Writing site,  
by Donna Shaw <[http://oregonstate.edu/dept/eli/buswrite/passive\\_voice.html](http://oregonstate.edu/dept/eli/buswrite/passive_voice.html)>)

### What is a passive voice verb?

Consider the following sentences:

Active Voice: The cat **scratched** the baby.

Passive Voice: The baby **was scratched** by the cat.

The **active voice** sentence follows the sentence order of subject, verb, object. The subject performs the action; the verb expresses the action; the object receives the action. The flow of the sentence is forward—moving from the subject to the object; consequently, active voice verbs propel the reader forward through the text.

The **passive voice** sentence flip-flops the subject and object. Now the subject is the passive recipient of the action. The agent performing the action in this sentence is expressed in the preposition phrase *by the cat*.

Another way to discuss the difference between active and passive relates to the focus of the sentence. The active voice sentence focuses on the agent performing the action, whereas passive voice sentences focus on the person or thing affected by the action—not the agent performing the action.

### How can a writer identify passive voice verbs?

The form of the passive voice verb will always consist of the following elements:

a form of *to be*\* + the **past participle** form of a verb (the ed/en/t form)

The baby **was scratched**.

The players **were injured**.

I **will be taken** to the airport.

Oftentimes, but not always, the agent performing the action will be expressed in a prepositional phrase beginning with *by*.

The players were injured **by the other team**.

I will be taken to the airport **by my boss**.

\*forms of *to be*: am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been

### Where can a writer find more information about the passive voice?

[http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g\\_actpass.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_actpass.html)

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/passivevoice.html>

## Why is active voice most often preferred?

### »Conciseness

Active voice involves fewer words and is more direct.

Active: The waiter dropped the tray.

Passive: The tray was dropped by the waiter.

### »Clarity

Active voice is direct and clearly states the relationship between subject and action.

Active: The review committee denied your request for funding.

Passive: Your request for funding has been denied by the review committee.

### »Focus

Active voice focuses the reader's attention on the agent performing the action.

Active: The defendant committed the atrocious crimes.

Passive: The atrocious crimes were committed by the defendant.

### »Style

Active voice propels the action forward through the sentence and onto the next.

Active: I shot the sherriff.

Passive: The sherriff was shot by me.

## When should a writer use passive voice?

√ The agent performing the action is unimportant.

The pyramids **were built** thousands of years ago.

√ The agent performing the action is unknown.

Several robberies **were committed** during the night.

√ The agent performing the action is common knowledge.

George Bush **was elected** in 2004.

√ The writer desires to control the focus of the sentence:

1) to de-emphasize the agent's role in the action

Mistakes **were made**. [The author cleverly does not mention who made the mistakes.]

The alarm **was triggered** by my son. [Passive construction shifts focus away from the son's responsibility.]

2) to emphasize the party receiving the action

Jack **was kicked** by Jill. [In this sentence, Jack seems to be the important element.]