

Active/Passive Voice

We frequently have a choice of making a noun either the subject or object in a sentence, with a resulting difference in verb form:

- **ACTIVE VERB:** Jim's father gave him a car.
- **PASSIVE VERBS:** Jim was given a car by his father.

The passive consists of a form of "be" plus the past participle (i.e., is given, are chose, was taken, have been corrected, etc.).

Appropriate Passives

The great majority of English sentences use active verbs, but sometimes the passive is appropriate. Passive constructions are natural if the actor is unknown or unimportant to the statement:

- The game was postponed because of rain.
- The expressway will be completed this spring.

A passive verb may also be appropriate if the writer wants to emphasize the object of the act rather than the doer:

- The fir was discovered by the night watchman.
- The bill is supported by congressmen f both parties.

Inappropriate Passives

Often, passive constructions are weak or awkward and should be changed to the more direct active form:

WEAK PASSIVE

A distinction is made by sociologists between achieved and ascribed status.

All of the major Russian novelists were studied in my comparative literature course.

ACTIVE

Sociologists make a distinction between achieved and ascribed status.

I studied all of the major Russian novelists in my comparative literature course.

It sometimes is awkward to combine an active and a passive verb in the same sentence

AWKWARD

The city needs more money to build new schools, and it will probably be raised through a bond issue.

REVISED

The city needs more money to build new schools and will probably raise it through a bond issue.

Any sentence that contains a direct object can almost always be constructed in two ways:

1. The **ACTIVE-VOICE** construction – The one we use most of the time, means that the subject will precede the verb, and direct object will come somewhere after the verb.

2. The **PASSIVE-VOICE** construction – This means that the direct object or indirect object becomes the new subject, while the old subject becomes the object of a prepositional phrase at the end of the sentence.

ACTIVE

John read the book.
Frank gave Mary some candy.
The class named George its chairman.

PASSIVE

The book was read by John.
Mary was given some candy by Frank.
George was named chairman by the class.

The verb phrase in a passive-voice sentence always has at least one helping verb (as in: is read, was read, has been read, is being read, will be read, might have been read, etc.). These helping verbs always include, just before the main verb, some form of “to be,” and show the tense and mood of the whole verb.

Exercise A: Find the verb and tell whether it is active or passive:

1. Astronomers did not discover the planet Pluto until 1930.
2. Many articles about Plains, Georgia, have been published in the newspapers.
3. Mrs. Hill was called to the stand six times.
4. A panel of judges found the defendant guilty.

Exercise B: Identify as Active (A) or Passive (P) and change the passive sentences to active and active sentences to passive.

1. The fuse was ignited by someone.
2. Many responsible citizens signed the petition.
3. A student’s outlook is molded by many influences in his or her environment.
4. The triumphant climbers raised the flag and place it in a crevice of the rock.
5. The president was swept into office by a landslide vote.
6. Fanciful and exaggerated stories are frequently told by children.