

TIPS FOR UNDERSTANDING PASSIVE VS. ACTIVE VOICE

Writing in passive voice isn't a grammatical error, but a stylistic choice. Verbs are written in one of two voices: active or passive. While the passive voice is ok to use in some situations, active voice improves clarity and readability.

On the other hand, according to the UT Writing Center, "Active verbs occur when the subject of the sentence *performs* the action of the sentence. The person or thing performing an action is called the *agent*. Passive voice occurs when the subject is the *recipient* of the action."

Here are some examples to help you identify active and passive voices:

Passive: A tub *is filled* with water

Active: Water *fills* the tub

Passive: A letter *was written* by me

Active: I *wrote* a letter

Passive: The Mona Lisa *was painted* by Da Vinci

Active: Da Vinci *painted* the Mona Lisa

REVISING FOR ACTIVE VOICE

The UT Writing Center provides three steps to change from passive to active voice:

1. Identify passive verbs.
 - a. Look through your paper for versions of the verb *to be* like *am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been*.
 - b. The use of one of these words before a past participle ending with a *-ed* is a clear indication of passive voice
 - i. Example: The ball was kicked by the boy.
2. Locate the agent performing the action.
 - a. The ball was kicked by **the boy**.
3. Rearrange the sentence to make it active, sometimes this is as easy as putting the agent *before* the action.
 - a. The boy kicked the ball

WHEN TO USE PASSIVE VOICE

There are some instances where it makes more sense to use passive rather than active voice. This occurs especially when we want to highlight an action more than a subject.

- Subject is unknown: many active voice constructions won't work if you don't have an explicit subject in play.
 - Ex: "My car *was stolen*," might sound better than "someone stole my car."
- Intentionally vague assignment of responsibility
 - Ex: "Mistakes were made," "The flight was canceled," "The check was lost in the mail," are all instances where there is not a specific actor "to blame" for what has occurred, so it's OK to be vague in assigning responsibility.
- Action highlighted over subject:
 - Ex: "Hollywood is known for its filmmaking," is technically passive. Since we're emphasizing the fact that it's *known* for something, this construction works better than "People know Hollywood for its filmmaking."

Work Cited

University of Texas Writing Center, “Passive Voice and Passive Agency.” <http://uwc.utexas.edu/handouts/passive-voice/>