

PASSIVE VOICE vs. ACTIVE VOICE

Writers use the **active voice** when the subject performs the action of the verb.

The **passive voice** is used when the subject of the sentence is acted on by the verb or receives its action.

ACTIVE: The dog bit the boy.

PASSIVE: The boy was bitten by the dog.

Sometimes sentences in the passive voice omit the “real” subject, the actor or doer of the action.

PASSIVE: The boy was bitten.

PASSIVE: The decision was made.

PASSIVE: The election was held.

TO SPOT THE PASSIVE VOICE

Look for a form of “to be” (is, was, are, is being) before the verb:

The boy **was bitten** several times.

Look for a “by the...” phrase which includes the real doer of the action:

The decision was made **by the committee**.

A few reasons to avoid the passive (adapted from *Writing Well*, Donald Hall and Sven Birkerts, 90-91):

The passive voice can subtract meaning from your writing.

Suppresses identity:

A message was received. → We don't know who received the message.

Avoids responsibility:

The vase was broken while Mom was out. → We don't know who is guilty.

Bombs were dropped on the targets. → We don't know who takes responsibility.

The passive voice can water down your argument.

It can be assumed that the test sample was faulty.

→ Who assumes this—the writer or others? Based on what evidence?

The conclusion drawn from this study is a negative one.

→ Who makes this conclusion? Why?

The passive, says Hall, can make you sound “as if [you] wrote labels for medicine bottles,” attempting to make a nonscientific subject sound more “credible.”

Crest has been shown to be effective at preventing cavities.

In some circumstances the passive may be the preferable choice:

Certain disciplines, especially the sciences, often use the passive for a sense of objectivity.

The experiment was conducted ten times with the same results.

The passive voice can be useful in when the identity of the person doing the action is unknown or unimportant:

The house was broken into over Labor Day weekend.

The shipments were delivered on time.