

Active and Passive Voice

UNC Asheville Writing Center

Most of us have gotten a paper back from a professor with big red letters spelling out *Passive*. But what does this mean? How do you fix it? Is it wrong? Active voice puts the focus of the sentence on the subject that acts upon the object. In other words, the subject in an active sentence *does* instead of having something *done to it*. In passive voice however, the object acted upon becomes the subject of the sentence. Further, using the active voice conveys confidence and assertiveness in one's writing, while passive verbs communicate weakness because the subjects receive the action instead of acting. Using passive voice is not grammatically incorrect, but rather is a stylistic choice. In general, use the active voice unless you have specific reasons to use the passive voice.

Identifying Passive Sentences

- Form of "to be," including: is, are, am, was, were, has been, have been, had been, will be, will have been, being
- Past Participle - a verb that usually ends in "ed"
- **Passive Voice = Form of To Be + Past Participle**

Example of Passive Voice

- Historically, wizards were persecuted by Muggles.
 - This sentence is passive because it includes were (a form of to be) and a past participle (persecuted).
 - In this case, the wizards are passive actors in the situation, with action being *done* to them.
 - Put into active voice the sentence reads: Historically, Muggles persecuted wizards.
- The turkey was eaten by the dog.
 - This sentence is passive because it includes a was (a form of to be) and a past participle (eaten), and the turkey (the subject) receives the action.
 - Again, the subject of the sentence, the turkey, is not an active participant in the situation - the turkey gets eaten - regardless of the turkey's wishes.
 - Put into active voice the sentence reads: The dog ate the turkey.

Purposeful Uses of Passive Voice

- To emphasize the action instead of the actors.
- To keep the focus of the sentence consistent throughout the whole passage.
- To describe an action whose actor is unknown.