

Active & Passive Voice

As a grammatical term, voice refers to the relationship between a subject (or actor) and verb/predicate (or action). Use active voice to make a sentence clear and emphatic, but use passive voice in specific circumstances.

How to Identify Passive Voice

- **Active voice:** an active subject (usually a person or thing) performs an action.
 - *The sun **scorched** the lawn.*
- **Passive voice:** a passive subject receives an action.
 - *The lawn **was scorched** by the sun.*
- When a preposition (especially “by”) comes before a noun, it often indicates passive voice.
 - *The lawn **was scorched** by the sun.*
- Sometimes forms of the verb “to be” (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been) create passive voice.
 - *This award **is in recognition** of your hard work. (Passive Voice)*
 - *This award **recognizes** your hard work. (Active Voice)*

How to Change Passive Voice to Active Voice

- Identify the actor and have it perform the main action.
 - *The sun **scorched** the lawn. (“Sun” is performing the action.)*
- Passive voice sometimes lacks an actor. If the actor is or can be known, consider adding it to the sentence.
 - *Teachers **will be given** the opportunity to perform. (The sentence has no actor.)*
 - *Directors **will give** teachers the opportunity to perform. (“Directors” are the actors.)*

When to use Passive Voice

- Use passive voice when the actor is unknown.
 - *Nearly half of the world’s fresh water **is locked** in the Antarctic ice sheet.*
- Use passive voice to emphasize the most important information in the sentence.
 - *The Constitution **was designed** by great men.*
 - In scientific writing, use passive voice to project an objective tone and emphasize the work rather than the person doing the work.
 - *The experiment **was conducted** under carefully controlled conditions over several months. (Instead of *I conducted the experiment*)*
- Use passive voice to avoid an awkward construction.
 - *Executioners **executed** at least 23 of them. (Awkward)*
 - Consider writing: *At least 23 of them **were executed**.* (This removes the awkward repetition by removing the actor.)

Beware grammar checkers! They don’t always find passive voice, and they can’t determine when passive voice is appropriate.

Dodds, Jack. The Ready Reference Handbook. San Francisco: Pearson, 2006.

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