

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE

VOICE – the form of a verb that tells whether or not the subject performs the action described in the sentence.

Active Voice: shows the **subject as the doer of the action**, while

Passive Voice: shows the **subject as the receiver of the action**.

- It is grammatically correct to use either the active or passive voice. However, the active voice should be used whenever possible because **it is clearer and makes more impact**.
- Active voice places the subject in its familiar place – in front of the verb – unlike passive voice, which reverses the typical order of subject and verb and places the emphasis on the receiver of the action.
- Limit use of the passive voice to situations in which the action is more important than the person doing the action or when the doer of the action is unknown or intentionally unstated.

IDENTIFYING PASSIVE VOICE

Sentences in the passive voice often contain the word “by” to indicate who performed an action. To easily identify a sentence in the passive voice, look for a verb phrase consisting of a form of the verb “**to be**” (is, was, were, are, am, be, being, been) followed by the past participle (verb form ending in “ed” or “en”) of another verb.

EXAMPLES:

→ **Active:** Priscilla chose John.

Passive: John *was chosen* by Priscilla.
verb “to be” + past participle of “choose”

In the active sentence above, the subject, Priscilla, is doing the choosing and John is the object (the noun receiving the action). In the corresponding passive sentence, Priscilla is the object.

→ **Active:** The average shopper pays little attention to cheap, nutritious foods.

Passive: Little attention is being paid to cheap nutritious foods by the average shopper.

In the active sentence, the average shopper is the subject who pays little attention to cheap, nutritious foods. In the passive sentence, the cheap, nutritious foods are being ignored.

→ **Active:** The tourists often throw pennies into the fountain.

Passive: Pennies are often thrown into the fountain by the tourists.

In the active sentence, the tourists are throwing the pennies, and the pennies are the object of the action. In the passive sentence, the pennies are being thrown. Notice the switch in functions: pennies is now the subject of the sentence, and the word “tourists” is now the object.

→ **Active:** My brother manipulates other people.

Passive: Other people are manipulated by my brother.

In the active sentence the brother is manipulating other people, while in the passive sentence the other people are being manipulated.

- **Active:** Mary loves John.
Passive: John is loved by Mary.

In the active sentence, Mary is loving John, while in the passive sentence John is being loved.

Not every passive sentence will include the word “by.” When the identity of the person is understood or unimportant, the word “by” is sometimes omitted, as in the example below.

EXAMPLE:

- **Active:** Jeff found the car on the main highway.
Passive: **The car was found on the main highway.**

In the active sentence, Jeff (the subject) discovers the car, while in the passive sentence, the car is discovered by an unnamed person.

REMEMBER: *Passive voice is not grammatically incorrect, but it should be used with care, with a specific purpose in mind.*

When the action is more important than the person doing the action or when the doer of the action is unknown or intentionally being de-emphasized, the use of passive voice is appropriate. For example, passive voice is typical in laboratory reports and papers written in APA style since the objective is to emphasize the experimental process.