



Academic Support Center
Writing Center

Active versus Passive Voice

Resource: The Writer's Harbrace Handbook, 3rd edition

Voice refers to the relationship between a verb and its subject.

Active voice: when a verb is in the active voice, the subject is generally a person or thing *performing* an action.

Passive voice: when a verb is in the passive voice, the subject is the *receiver* of the action.

MLA style , APA style and most college writing require writing in active voice.

- The use of verbs *was, were, have, had, and has* in formal college papers often results in passive voice. To change passive voice to active, choose a more active verb.

For example,

Passive voice: I *have* a paper that is due tomorrow.

Active voice: I *must write* a paper because it is due tomorrow.

Passive voice: Each student has class in the morning.

Active voice: Each student should attend class in the morning.

- The use of the unidentified pronoun *it* sometimes causes passive writing because the reader does not know who or what this pronoun refers. To change passive voice to active, identify who or what *it* refers as in these two examples:

Passive voice: It is believed the economy will improve in two years.

Active voice: Experts believe the economy will improve in two years.

- When a verb is in the passive voice, the subject is the *receiver* of the action.

Examples:

Passive voice: The poem “The Raven” was written by Edgar Allan Poe. (The subject Edgar Allan Poe is the receiver in this sentence and the receiver “poem” is used as the subject.)

To change to active voice, place the actual subject in the sentence where it belongs:

Active voice: Edgar Allan Poe wrote the poem “The Raven.”

Writing in active voice is the preferred voice to use when writing essays. Sentences written in the active voice are generally clearer than and emphasize action more than sentences in passive voice.

- Active voice emphasizes the subject of the sentence and its corresponding action verb
- the correct way to write in active voice is to make the person or thing the subject of the sentence, followed by a verb that best describes the action

Example of changing passive voice writing to active form:

Passive voice:

The concert was attended by scores of fans in their pre-teenage and early 20 years. The band chosen by the city attracted these fans to raise money for the new music center.

Revised to active voice:

Scores of fans between the ages of 13 and 22 attended the rock concert that featured the popular band Shadow of a Doubt. The city chose this band because officials knew they could easily raise money to build a new music center.

The passive voice is used to emphasize *the recipient* of the action in one of three ways:

- the subject in the passive sentence is the recipient of the action; not the “actor” who performs it
Example: The *construction* of the Dinosaur Museum was completed in 1923. (*Construction* is the recipient here.)
- if the “actor” is mentioned, that proper name, noun, or pronoun is placed in a prepositional phrase that begins with “by”

Example: The Dinosaur Museum was designed *by Gunther Apelhaus*.

- the verb form is different

- the verb in passive voice consists of a form of the auxiliary verb “be” and the past participle
- depending on the verb tense, the auxiliary verbs “have/has” and “will” may also be present along with the “be” verb

Example: The Dinosaur Museum *has been designed by Gunther Apelhaus*.

To change this sentence to active voice, place the subject at the beginning of the sentence and use an action verb:

Gunther Apelhaus designed the Dinosaur Museum.

Paired examples of passive voice sentences revised to active form:

Passive: I was called in to work early by the boss.

Active: The boss called me to come to work early.

Passive: All of the employees were called in to work early by the boss.

Active: The boss called all of the employees to come to work early.

Passive: The employees are being called in to work early by the boss.

Active: The boss is calling the employees to come to work early.

Passive: The employees have been called in to work early by the boss.

Active: An hour ago, the boss called the employees to come to work early.

Passive: In two hours, the employees will have been called to come in to work early by the boss.

Active: Within two hours, the boss will call all of the employees to come to work early.



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