

# Active and Passive Voice

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The infamous passive voice has been given a terrible reputation because it can (and mostly does) make our writing not as clear as it could be. With that said, passive voice is not always a bad thing – sometimes it can be used intentionally for stylistic qualities. Making yourself familiar with passive and active voice can improve your writing substantially.

**1. What is passive voice?** Passive voice makes the recipient of the action (the verb) the subject in a sentence. This is opposite of how we “normally” write in active voice, where the subject of a sentence is performing the action.

*Example: Bobby was given a present by Susie.*

*Example: Why are showers taken daily by most people?*

*Example: The house was burned by the murderer.*

*Example: Passive voice is thought of as dumb by Madolyn.*

**2. What is active voice?** Most of the time we use active voice without even realizing it. In active voice the subject of the sentence is performing the action. Conversely the direct object of the sentence is receiving the action.

*Example: Susie gave Bobby a present.*

*Example: Why do most people take showers daily?*

*Example: The murderer burned the house.*

*Example: Madolyn thinks passive voice is dumb.*

**3. How do I spot passive voice?** Passive voice is generally indicated by a form of the “to be” verb plus the past participle. “To be” verbs include: is, was, has, will be, has been, are, am, being, etc. Past participles are generally indicated by the suffix –ed, such as: walked, burned, shipped, etc. However, some past participles do not end in –ed, such as: eaten (to eat), run (to run), brought (to bring), lost (to lose), taught (to teach), etc.

**4. Why is passive voice frowned upon?** If we compare the examples from above it is easy to see that the active voice sentences are much clearer than their counterparts. Often times when we use passive voice it creates confusion about who or what is performing the action in a sentence. Remember that clarity is highly regarded among writers – you want to be able to reach your readers!

**5. When is passive voice appropriate?**

- When you want to emphasize the recipient of the action and minimize the do-er. This could come in handy in **journalism** when the writer is trying to minimize their appearance in a story or in **ethical/moral conflicts** worldwide where the people affected are of the most importance.
- *Example: The misplaced people of Darfur were being attacked by rebel soldiers.*
- In **scientific writing**, such as lab reports, when you intend to emphasize the experiment and not the experimenter.
- *Example: The chloride solution was being mixed by Jonathan.*

*The following sources were consulted in the making of this handout:*

Hacker, Diana. *A Writer's Reference*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. 128 – 130.  
“Passive Voice.” *The Writing Center, UNC-Chapel Hill*. N.d. Web. 7 March 2012.

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