

Passive/Active Voice

How to Recognize Active and Passive Sentences

1. Find the subject (the main character of the sentence).
2. Find the main verb (the action that the sentence identifies).
3. Examine the relationship between the subject and main verb.

Does the subject perform the action of the main verb? (If so, the sentence is active.) Does the subject sit there while something else – named or unnamed – performs an action on it? (If so, the sentence is passive.) Can't tell? If the main verb is a linking verb ("is," "was," "are," "seems (to be)," "becomes" etc.), then the verb functions like an equals sign; there is no action involved – it merely describes a state of being.

Basic Examples:

"I love you."

1. subject: "I"
 2. action: "loving"
 3. relationship: The subject ("I") is the one performing the action ("loving")
- The sentence is active.**

"You are loved by me."

1. subject: "you"
2. action: "loving"
3. relationship: The subject ("You") sits passively while the action ("loving") is performed by somebody else ("me")

This sentence is passive.

Difference between Passive Voice and Past Tense

Many people confuse the **passive voice** with the **past tense**. The most common passive constructions also happen to be past tense (e.g. "I've been framed"), but **"voice" has to do with who, while "tense" has to do with when**.

	Active Voice	Passive Voice
Past Tense	I taught; I learned.	I was (have been) taught [by someone]; It was (has been)
Present Tense	I teach; I learn.	I am [being] taught [by someone]; It is [being]
Future Tense	I will teach; I will learn.	I will be taught [by someone]; It will be

Imperatives: Active Commands

A command (or "imperative") is a kind of active sentence, in which "you" (the one being addressed) are being ordered to perform the action. (If you refuse to obey, the sentence is still active.)

- Get to work on time. Insert tab A into slot B. Take me to your leader.

- Ladies and gentlemen, let us consider, for a moment, the effect of the rafting sequences on our understanding of the rest of the novel.

Sloppy Passive Constructions

Because passive sentences do not need to identify the performer of an action, they can lead to sloppy or misleading statements (especially in technical writing). Compare how clear and direct these passive sentences become, when they are rephrased as imperative sentences.

Ambiguous Passive Verbs

- To drain the tank, the grill should be removed, or the storage compartment can be flooded.

Because they do not specify the actors, the passive constructions ("should be removed" and "can be flooded") contribute to the ambiguity of this sentence. Does the author intend to **1. offer two different ways to drain the tank ("you may either remove the grill or flood the compartment")? 2. warn of an undesirable causal result ("if you drain the tank without removing the grill, the result will be that the storage compartment is flooded")?**

The readers would have to know something about how the tank works in order to make sense of the instructions, but the thing about instructions is that people are reading them because they don't already know what to do. Here are two ways you could fix the ambiguity.

Revision 1:

Drain the tank in one of the following ways:
remove the grill
flood the storage compartment

Revision 2:

Remove the grill.
Drain the tank.

Warning:

If you fail to remove the grill first, you may flood the storage compartment (which is where you are standing right now).

The Passive Voice Is not Wrong

Passive verbs are not automatically wrong. When used rarely and deliberately, the passive voice serves an important purpose.

When you wish to downplay the action:

Mistakes will be made, and lives will be lost; the sad truth is learned anew by each generation.

When you wish to downplay the actor:

Three grams of reagent 'A' were added to a beaker of 10% saline solution.

(In the scientific world, the actions of a researcher are ideally not supposed to affect the outcome of an experiment; the experiment is supposed to be the same no matter who carries it out. I will leave it to you and your chemistry professor to figure out whether that's actually true, but in the meantime, don't use excessive passive verbs simply to avoid using "I" in a science paper.)

When the actor is unknown:

The victim was approached from behind and hit over the head with a salami.

Works Cited

- Orwell, George. *Politics and the English Language*. "A Collection of Essays. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954. 167-177.
- Strunk, William. *Elements of Style*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Priv print, 1918. <<http://www.bartleby.com/141/>> 03 Jul 2004.
- United States. Securities and Exchange Commission. *A Plain English Handbook*. Draft. Washington D.C. 1977. <<http://www.sec.gov/consumer/plaine.htm>>. 12 Apr 1999.