

PASSIVE VOICE

“Action is eloquence.”

(Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*)

“One of the greatest curses of run-of-the-mill American writing . . . is its crippling dependence on passive voice.”
(Thomas H. Cain, Common Sense about Writing)

“England, ‘the natural protector of the weaker communities.’ England, the chosen master of the seas. And why? Because ‘it has been well said’ that this should be so. Because the possibility of any other nation’s being supreme at sea was ‘being excluded.’ But by whom has it ‘been said’? By whom was it ‘being excluded’? How simple the problems of the world become in the passive voice. It [is] the voice of neither precision nor reason.” (Joachim Remak, The Origins of World War I, 1871-1914)

Sentences in active voice

- 👉 are more direct and specific
- 👉 are more informative
- 👉 are more exciting, forceful & emphatic

- 👉 have a subject, verb, and object

Sentences in passive voice

- ☹️ are weak, wordy, roundabout
- ☹️ are undramatic and unexciting
- ☹️ often are clumsy
- ☹️ (often) are missing the actor (which is a particular problem for historians who need to know who did what and why)
- ☹️ have a verb and object

Passive voice is composed of
1) a form of the “to be” verb
2) the past participle of another verb

SUBJECT (WHO) <i>Agent</i>	VERB (DID) <i>Action</i>	OBJECT (WHAT) <i>Goal</i>
JACK KEROUAC	WROTE	<u>ON THE ROAD</u>
THE MEDICI	CONTROLLED	FLORENCE
THE BOLSHEVIKS	KILLED	THE CZAR

ACTIVE: President Truman	seized	the steel mills
PASSIVE: The steel mills	<u>were seized</u>	by President Truman
PASSIVE: The steel mills	<u>were seized</u>	

PASSIVE: The whistle WAS BLOWN. (By whom?)

ACTIVE: The crook BLEW the whistle.

PASSIVE: The law WAS PASSED. (By whom?)

ACTIVE: Congress PASSED the law.

PASSIVE: Resolutions ARE MADE. (By whom?)

ACTIVE: Optimistic people MAKE resolutions.

PASSIVE: It HAS LONG BEEN THOUGHT that he was innocent. (By whom?)

PASSIVE: It HAS LONG BEEN THOUGHT by historians that he was innocent.

ACTIVE: Historians HAVE LONG THOUGHT that he was innocent.

PASSIVE: Active voice IS EMPHASIZED. (By whom?)

PASSIVE: Active voice IS EMPHASIZED by experts.

ACTIVE: Experts EMPHASIZE active voice.

PASSIVE: The book WAS PUBLISHED in 1976. (By whom?)

PASSIVE: The book WAS PUBLISHED in 1976 by Margaret Truman.

ACTIVE: Margaret Truman published the book in 1976.

PASSIVE: The final step to war HAD BEEN TAKEN. (By whom?)

PASSIVE: The final step to war HAD BEEN TAKEN by the president.

ACTIVE: The president had taken the final step to war.

Do not confuse passive voice with past tense:

The book WAS a best seller = past tense, active voice

The book WAS PUBLISHED (by whom?) = past tense, passive voice

The passive voice can be expressed in all tenses and forms:

- * The enemy IS DEFEATED. (present)
- * The enemy WAS DEFEATED. (past)
- * The enemy WILL BE DEFEATED. (future)
- * The enemy IS BEING DEFEATED. (present progressive)
- * The enemy HAS BEEN DEFEATED. (past perfect)
- * The enemy expects TO BE DEFEATED. (infinitive)
- * The enemy hates BEING DEFEATED. (gerund)

NOTE: Passive voice can be effective

. . . and some disciplines (e.g., psychology and biology) rely heavily on it.

Consider using passive voice if:

- ✓ the receiver of the action--or the action itself--is more important than the actor.
 - ✓ the doer of the action is unknown or unimportant.
- ✓ preceding sentences have made the doer absolutely clear to the reader.
 - ✓ passive voice provides needed emphasis.

For example:

- ✓ The glory of the Lord SHALL BE REVEALED.
- ✓ In 1936 Franklin Roosevelt WAS REELECTED.
- ✓ Tax returns must BE MAILED by midnight on April 15.
- ✓ Taking pictures IS NOT PERMITTED during performances.
- ✓ Since the treasure WAS UNEARTHED five hundred years ago, it has been a major source of national pride. (For a paper on the treasure in recent years.)