

Active Versus Passive Voice

English has numerous verb tenses and forms, but only two grammatical voices: the active and the passive. In general, the active voice is preferred because it makes sentences direct, forceful, and concise; however, there are situations where the passive is unavoidable or even preferable. Writer Samuel Johnson gives us a good example (and some good advice): “What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure.” Knowing the different constructions and their effects will help you make the best choice.

In **active voice**, the subject of the sentence performs the action of the verb. It follows the **subject + verb** construction:

James *kicked* the ball.

This sentence is clear and thorough without being wordy. It feels active, even though the verb is in past tense.

Passive voice flips the framework: the action of the verb is being done to the subject. It follows a **subject + to be + past participle verb** construction; the subject of this sentence would be the direct object of a transitive verb (one that acts on something else; it leaves you asking ...*whom?* or ...*what?*) in an active sentence:

The ball was *kicked*.

Notice what’s missing now: James. Passive voice is often used when the person performing the action is either unknown, unimportant, obvious, or “people” in general. It’s appropriate to use when the action is more important than the agent.

Wheat is *grown* in Kansas.

Sam was *fired* for being late all the time.

We can assume farmers grow wheat and that Sam’s boss did the firing.

When it is important to know specifically who performs the verb, but you still want to emphasize the object, you can use passive voice and include a by-phrase naming the agent (the noun responsible for the action).

Active: **Julia’s project** *overshadowed* mine in the exhibition.

Passive: **My project** was *overshadowed* by Julia’s in the exhibition.

But be careful: passive constructions with by-phrases are often much wordier.

Exceptions to Passive Voice

Stative verbs refer to a condition that exists, not an action in progress; they have a direct object (like transitive verbs), but cannot be used in passive voice. Writers have to learn by experience which verbs can and cannot take the passive.

She resembles a Botticelli figure. ✓

A Botticelli figure is resembled by her. ✗

Everyone agreed with me. ✓

I was agreed with by everyone. ✗

When to Use Passive Voice

Some disciplines prefer passive voice. They use it to shape who or what a story is about or to focus the reader/listener's attention. Here are some examples of those fields and how they use passive constructions.

Scientific and **technical** writing often leave out the person doing the action to emphasize objectivity and make experiments and instructions more repeatable and universal.

The test subjects in group B were given sugar pills as a placebo.

This product is not intended for small children.

Here, it's not important who's conducting the experiment or who created the product.

Legal and **political** texts use passive voice to shift a story's focus and avoid assigning blame.

Taxes will be raised again next year.

Ms. Lee had been informed about the lost packages before June 1.

The the first sentence intentionally leaves out the people raising taxes. In the second sentence, the reader's focus is on Ms. Lee as the active party, rather than whoever informed her.

Art and design are often discussed in passive voice because we want to focus on the object (rather than on the artist). In the following excerpt from a student essay, the writer uses passive voice because the formal elements of the urn are more important than who made it.

"The Cinerary Urn, as noted in the museum label, can be dated back to 1st century CE. After this urn was made, people adopted cremation as preferred form of burial. The urn is made of marble. It is shaped as a tiny temple with four Corinthian columns and a gable roof. The gable roof is removable, for people to put remains in."

Voice
Quiz

Do you see the one active voice sentence in the excerpt above? How could you change it to passive voice?

Voice
Quiz

Voice Quiz Solution:

In the second sentence, "people adopted cremation" is in active voice. The subject of this sentence is "people," but these people seem less important than the impact of the urn itself. We can change the sentence to passive voice: "After this urn was made, cremation was adopted as a preferred form of burial."