

# Active & Passive Voice

As a grammatical term, voice refers to the relationship between a subject (or actor) and verb/predicate (or action). Use active voice to make a sentence clear and emphatic, but use passive voice in specific circumstances.

## How to Identify Passive Voice

- Active voice: an active subject (usually a person or thing) performs an action.
  - *The sun scorched the lawn.*
- Passive voice: a passive subject receives an action.
  - *The lawn was scorched by the sun.*
- When a preposition (especially “by”) comes before a noun, it often indicates passive voice.
  - *The lawn was scorched by the sun.*
- Sometimes forms of the verb “to be” (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been) create passive voice.
  - *This award is in recognition of your hard work.* (Passive Voice)
  - *This award recognizes your hard work.* (Active Voice)

## How to Change Passive Voice to Active Voice

- Identify the actor and have it perform the main action.
  - *The sun scorched the lawn.* (“Sun” is performing the action.)
- Passive voice sometimes lacks an actor. If the actor is or can be known, consider adding it to the sentence.
  - *Teachers will be given the opportunity to perform.* (The sentence has no actor.)
  - *Directors will give teachers the opportunity to perform.* (“Directors” are the actors.)

## When to use Passive Voice

- Use passive voice when the actor is unknown.
  - *Nearly half of the world’s fresh water is locked in the Antarctic ice sheet.*
- Use passive voice to emphasize the most important information in the sentence.
  - *The Constitution was designed by great men.*
    - In scientific writing, use passive voice to project an objective tone and emphasize the work rather than the person doing the work.
      - *The experiment was conducted under carefully controlled conditions over several months.* (Instead of *I conducted the experiment . . . .*)
- Use passive voice to avoid an awkward construction.
  - *Executioners executed at least 23 of them.* (Awkward)
  - Consider writing: *At least 23 of them were executed.* (This removes the awkward repetition by removing the actor.)

**Beware grammar checkers!** They don’t always find passive voice, and they can’t determine when passive voice is appropriate.

Dodds, Jack. The Ready Reference Handbook. San Francisco: Pearson, 2006.

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