



Grammar: Passive and Active Voice

When writing, it is important to understand the tense and tone of your sentences, particularly whether a sentence is in passive or active voice. A sentence written in active voice will have the subject *acting out* the verb, while a sentence in passive voice will have the subject *acted upon* by the verb. In most disciplines, it is recommended to avoid passive voice and ensure all sentences are in active voice; however, in some of the natural sciences, it is preferred that one write using passive voice. This is especially important in abstracts for lab reports. If you are unsure, asking your professors never hurts!

Sometimes, the person performing the action isn't as important as the action itself, which tends to be why natural sciences require passive voice. In some circumstances, you may even *want* to obscure responsibility, particularly if something may be received in mixed ways. One example of this might be when proposing a project that may not be received well by all depending on the person proposing it, or a project that isn't made more notable by those working on it. Governments tend to obscure who exactly proposed a piece of legislation with the words "X legislation was proposed today," for instance.

Sentences in active voice will have the subject performing an action through use of a verb. In these sentences, the subjects are doing something to the direct object, or target. This means that when reading the sentence, the responsible party is clearly named first.

- *Sammy D. Eagle trampled the baby grass while dancing in front of the UC.*
- *President Paino hosts dinners for students to attend.*

Speaking and Writing Center [1]: This makes it much more difficult to call and complain about the proposed legislation since you would have to do research first to figure out who sponsored the bill which is one purpose for constructing this sentence in passive voice.



Sentences in passive voice will have the subject acted upon, or targeted, by the verb. This means that when reading the sentence, it won't be clear who is responsible for whatever has been done, only that something has been done.

- The baby grass was trampled in front of the UC.
- Dinners were hosted for students to attend.

An excellent trick for figuring out whether a sentence is in passive or active voice is by attaching a preposition, or placement word, and noun to the end of the clause, oftentimes with a helper verb. This will make it clear who is "responsible," but delays knowing the responsible party until the end of the sentence. Because you have to add additional phrases at the end of sentences written in passive voice, they are almost always longer and wordier than sentences written in active voice.

- An award was won (by Sammy D. Eagle.)
 - This clause is in passive voice, as it's grammatically correct if you attach "by Sammy D. Eagle" to the end of it. It's passive because Sammy D. Eagle is responsible for winning the award, but you don't know that until the end of the sentence.
- Vocelli Pizza allows students to order food through GrubHub (by Sammy D. Eagle.)
 - This sentence is in active voice, which you can tell because it no longer makes sense if you add "by Sammy D. Eagle" to the end of it. Sammy D. Eagle is not responsible for any of the actions within this sentence, as all actions were already accounted for.

Speaking and Writing Center [2]: This phrase, which used to be the noun the verb was acting on (direct object), is now serving as the subject of the sentence. It is still what is affected by the verb, but its function in the sentence has changed now that this is passive voice.

Speaking and Writing Center [3]: While in the original sentences, it was clear who did the trampling and who hosted dinner, passive voice will "hide" the responsible party as seen here in these rewritten sentences.