

Active and Passive Voice

Voice refers to the form of a verb that indicates when a grammatical subject performs the action or is the receiver of the action. When a sentence is written in the active voice, the subject performs the action; in the passive voice, the subject receives the action. In academic writing, it is generally preferred to choose an active verb and pair it with a subject that names the person or thing doing or performing the action. Active verbs are stronger and usually more emphatic than forms of the verb “be” or verbs in the passive voice.

Active: The award-winning chef prepares each meal with loving care.

Passive: Each meal is prepared with loving care by the award-winning chef.

In the above example of an active sentence, the simple subject is “chef” and “prepares” is the verb: the chef prepares “each meal with loving care.” In the passive sentence, “meal” is the simple subject and “is prepared” is the verb: each meal is prepared “by the award-winning chef.” In effect, the object of the active sentence becomes the subject in the passive sentence. Although both sentences have the same basic components, their structure makes them different from each other. Active sentences are about what people (or things) do, while passive sentences are about what happens to people (or things).

USING THE AUXILIARY VERB “BE”

The passive voice is formed by using a form of the auxiliary verb “be” (be, am, is, are, was, were, being, been) followed by the past participle of the main verb.

Active

He **loves** me.

We **took** our children to the circus.

A thief **stole** my money.

Passive

I **am loved**.

The children **were taken** to the circus.

My money **was stolen**.

Notice how the “be” auxiliaries change the meaning of the verbs from action to condition or from “doing” to “being.”

He **remembers** his grandmother. (“he” is doing an action: remembering)

His grandmother **is remembered**. (“she” is in a condition: being remembered)

In this way, the past participle functions very much like an adjective; it describes the subject.

The woman is pretty.

The woman is married.

She is a pretty woman

She is a married woman.

VERB TENSES USED IN ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE

The following is a summary of active and passive forms of all verb tenses. Remember that in active forms the subject of the sentence is the person or thing that does the action. In passive constructions, the verb is performed by someone or something other than the subject; often, the action is done to the subject by someone else.

Present Time

- **Simple Present**

Use the simple present tense to make a generalization, to present a state of being, or to indicate a habitual or repeated action.

Active
base form or “-s/-es” form

Professor Brown **teaches** at Hunter.

All humans **are** equal.

Maria **eats** in the cafeteria.

Passive
am/is/are + past participle

Sonia **is taught** by Professor Brown.

All humans **are created** equal.

The cafeteria **is cleaned**

- **Present Progressive**

Use the present progressive to describe an ongoing activity or a temporary action.

Active
am/is/are + -ing

The students **are learning** Spanish.

I **am working** at McDonald’s until I finish school.

Passive
am/is/are + being + -ed/-en

Classes **are being conducted** in Spanish.

He **is being hired** to work at McDonald’s.

- **Present Perfect**

Use the present perfect to describe an action occurring in the past but relevant to the present, or extending to the present.

Active
has/have + -ed/-en

Hunter **has opened** a language institute in East Harlem.

Passive
has/have + been + -ed/-en

The language institute **has been opened** to relocate students off the main campus.

Hunter **has offered** E.S.L courses for twenty years.

E.S.L. courses **have been offered** since the beginning of Open Admissions

- **Present Perfect Progressive**

Use the present perfect progressive to describe an ongoing action beginning before now and is still relevant to the present.

Active

has/have + been + -ing

Hunter **has been awarding** BA and MA diplomas for over one hundred years.

Passive

has/have + been + being + -ed/-en

Note: Because of awkward construction, the perfect progressive form is not used in the passive voice. Instead, an adverb may be used to show continuing action: “We have been **repeatedly** scolded for being late.”

Past Time

- **Simple Past**

Use the simple past to indicate a general or habitual action occurring in the past or at a specific time in the past.

Active

base + -ed or irregular form

Our family **bought** all our clothes at Sears when I was young.

On my fifteenth birthday, my uncle **gave** me one hundred dollars

When I was in high school, my friends and I **drove** to the mall on weekends.

Passive

was/were + -ed/-en

The clothes **were bought** by my mother

The money **was given** to me to buy new clothes.

We **were** always **driven** to the mall by my friend's older brother.

In informal conversation, speakers of English often express habitual behavior in the past using the modal “**would.**”

Active

would + base

We **would** usually **eat** burgers in the food court.

Passive

would + be + -ed/-en

Most of the french fries **would be eaten** before we got to the table.

- **Past Progressive**

Use the past progressive to indicate an ongoing action in the past or an action continuing through a specific past time.

Active
was/were + -ing

Mary and Paul **were dating** in those days.

Passive
was/were + being + -ed/-en

One afternoon, Mary **was being kissed** by Paul when her mother passed by.

- **Past Perfect**

Use the past perfect to indicate an action completed prior to a particular time or before another action in the past.

Active
had + -ed/-en

Completed:

Mary's mother was shocked because she **had forbidden** her daughter to date.

Passive
had + been + -ed/-en

Mary **had been kissed** many times before that day.

- **Past Perfect Progressive**

Use the past perfect progressive to indicate a continuing action that began before a past action or time.

Active
had + been + -ing

Mary **had been trying** to tell her mother about Paul for a long time.

Passive
had + been + being + -ed/-en

Future Time

- **Simple Future**

Use the future to indicate an action that is expected to take place at a future time.

Active
will + base

Paul and Mary **will marry** in June.

or
am/is/are going to + base

Mary **is going to wear** her grandmother's gown.

Passive
will + be + -ed/-en

They **will be married** by a priest and a rabbi.

or
am/is/are + going to be + -ed/-en

The gown **is going to be adjusted** to fit Mary.

- **Future Progressive**

Use the future progressive to indicate an action in future with emphasis on continuing action.

Active
will + base + -ing

Passive
will + be + being + -ed/en

Mary and Paul **will be spending** lots of time on the beach.

Note: Not used in the passive voice.

- **Future Perfect**

Use the future perfect to indicate a future action expected to be completed before another future action or time.

Active
will + have + -ed/-en

Passive
will + have + been + -ed/en

By their wedding date, they **will have saved** enough money to buy a house.

Note: Not used in the passive voice.

- **Future Perfect Progressive**

Use the future perfect progressive to indicate an action projected to have been going on for a while before a time in the future.

Active
will + have + been + -ing

Passive
will + have + been + being + -ed/-en

When they celebrate their first anniversary, they **will have been living** together for a full year.

Note: Not used in the passive voice.

WHEN TO USE PASSIVE VOICE

Although active voice is generally preferred in academic writing, passive voice is acceptable under certain conditions.

Use passive voice

- **to emphasize the receiver of the action instead of the doer**

Quizzes are given regularly.

Grades for all students are averaged.

Questions are encouraged.

- **to keep the focus on the same subject through several sentences or paragraphs**

My sister and I grew up and went to school in Jamaica. We were educated according to the British system. In 1997 we were given the opportunity to come to the United States. We decided to finish high school before leaving our own country. We were concerned that the education in this country might not be as good as the one we had there, and we wanted to improve our English too.

- **when we do not know who performed the action:**

Ray's calculator was made in Germany.

The answers have been filled in.

- **when we do not wish to mention the doer of the action:**

Many problems have been ignored for too long.

I was given some bad advice.

Note: This use often reveals an unwillingness to take responsibility (or place it on someone else).

Substitute:

“A mistake was made.”

“Not enough has been done to end homelessness.”

“You have been misinformed.”

For:

“I made a mistake.”

“We have not done enough to end homelessness.”

“You are wrong.”

- **when we want to sound objective or avoid using the subject “I”**

Studies have shown . . .

It is well-known . . .

Hamlet is considered . . .

It can be assumed . . .

It has been established . . .