

## Active and Passive Voice

Usually, effective writing uses the active voice and shuns the passive. Nevertheless, some situations are awkward or inappropriate when expressed in the active voice. Certainly, these situations call for the passive voice.

### Reasons to use the passive voice:

- The agent (doer) of the action is unimportant.
  - The pyramids **were built** thousands of years ago.
- The agent is unknown.
  - Several robberies **were committed** during the night.
- The agent is common knowledge, and mentioning it would be redundant.
  - George Bush **was elected** in 2000.
- The writer desires to control focus of sentence.
  - 1) to de-emphasize the agent's role in the action
    - The alarm was triggered by my son. [Passive construction shifts focus away from the son's responsibility.]
  - 2) to emphasize the party receiving the action
    - **Jack** was kicked by Jill.

### Reasons to use the active voice:

- The active voice is shorter and more direct.
  - Compare.  
**Active:** The waiter dropped the tray of food.  
**Passive:** The tray of food was dropped by the waiter.
- The active voice is less awkward and clearly states relationship between subject and action.  
**Passive:** Your request for funding has been denied by the review committee.  
**Active:** The review committee denied your request for funding.

\*Adapted from <http://www.uark.edu/campus-resources/qwrtcntr/resources/handouts/activepassive.htm>

- The active voice sentence pattern propels the reader forward through your writing thus avoiding weak prose.

Used with permission from Oregon State University Business Writing web page by Donna Shaw  
[www.orst.edu](http://www.orst.edu)

## Identifying Passive Voice Verbs AR 1/21/02

Verbs have two voices: **active** and **passive**.

In **active voice sentences**, the verb expresses the action in the sentence, the subject performs the action, and the object is the recipient of the action. Active sentences follow the pattern: subject-verb-object.

Jill kicked Jack.

In a **passive voice sentence**, the subject and object flip-flop. The subject becomes the passive recipient of the action.

Jack was kicked by Jill.

## Form of Passive Voice Verbs

The passive voice requires a "double verb" and will always consist of a form of the verb "to be" and the past participle (usually the "en/ed/t" form) of another verb. Example: is kicked

Writers should be familiar with the forms of "to be" so that they can easily identify the passive voice in their work.

Review the forms of "to be": am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been

Note the forms of "to be" in the examples of the verb "to kick" in various forms of the passive voice:

**is** kicked-----had **been** kicked  
**was** kicked-----is going to **be** kicked  
**is** being kicked-----will **be** kicked  
has **been** kicked-----can **be** kicked  
was **being** kicked-----should **be** kicked

Often passive voice sentences will contain a "**by**" **phrase** indicting who or what performed the action. Passive sentences can be easily transformed into active sentences when the object of the preposition "by" is moved to the subject position in the sentence.

Passive: The cookies were eaten **by the children**.

Active: The children ate the cookies.

Passive: The tunnels are dug **by the gophers**.

Active: The gophers dug the tunnels.