

a. What are the passive and active voices?

In an active sentence, the subject is doing the action. In a passive sentence, the subject is NOT doing the action but is instead the recipient of the action.

Examples:

Active: *The crew paved the entire stretch of highway.*

Passive: *Experiments were conducted at 20°C in a shaker incubator at 100 rpm.*

b. Rule: a passive sentence must **ALWAYS** contain a subject, the verb to be, and a past participle. (The past participle (PP) is the form of a verb that you use when you say “We have **VISITED** Paris,” or “She was **TOLD** to do it.” International students have learned irregular verbs like this: *see, saw, seen*. The first form is the base form of the verb, the second form is the simple past form, and the third form is the **past participle**.)

Examples:

- i. The child **WAS TOLD** to clean her room. (This is a passive sentence)
- ii. The child **IS PLAYING** in her room. (This is an active sentence because there is no PP.)

c. How do we recognize active and passive constructions?

Ask yourself these three questions:

- i. What is the action/verb in this sentence?
- ii. What/who is the subject of this sentence?
- iii. Is the subject of the sentence **PERFORMING** the action/verb?

If the answer to the last question is **YES**, then the sentence is in the **ACTIVE** voice. If the answer to the last question is **NO**, then the sentence is in the **PASSIVE** voice.

Examples:

Every night the office is vacuumed and dusted by the cleaning crew.

- i. What is the action/verb in this sentence? To vacuum.
- ii. What/who is the subject of this sentence? The office.
- iii. Is the the office doing the vacuuming? No. *The cleaning crew* is doing the vacuuming.

The sentence is thus in the passive voice.

The famous artist will have been painting the mural for over six months by the time it is finished.

- i. What is the action/verb in this sentence? To paint.
- ii. What/who is the subject of this sentence? The famous artist.
- iii. Is the subject of the sentence doing the painting? Yes. The artist is painting.

The sentence is thus in the active voice.

d. When should we use the passive voice?

- a. To emphasize the receiver of the action or the action itself

Example: *The DNA was sequenced.*

Example: *Each experiment was run in duplicate.*

- b. When we don't know who did the action

Example: *The store was robbed and its owner killed.*

Example: *Following termination of activation of soil sampling mode, the process resolution was achieved.*

- c. When we want to hide or de-emphasize the agent of the action

Example: *Streptomycin, the first effective cure for tuberculosis, was discovered by Selman Waksman.*

Example: *I was told to be here at 10am on Tuesday.*

- d. When we wish to shift emphasis from what was the object in a first sentence to what becomes the subject in subsequent sentences.
Example: The executive committee approved an entirely new policy for dealing with academic suspension and withdrawal. The policy had been written by a subcommittee on student behavior.

- e. When the sentence cannot be converted to active voice
Example: *I was born in 1984.*
Example: *Petri dishes are made of plastic.*

f. When should we not use the passive voice?

- a. Use the active voice for the majority of your writing (except in science writing). It makes your meaning clearer for readers and keeps your sentences short and uncomplicated.
Example: *The entrance exam was failed by over one third of the applicants*
Example: *Over one third of the applicants failed the entrance exam.*
- b. Use the active voice when you want your writing to seem “strong and energetic.”
Example: *A beautiful dinner is going to be made by Sally.*
Example: *Sally is going to make a beautiful dinner.*

g. So what’s the problem?

- a. People often confuse active/passive forms
Example: *The hostages were kept prisoners in the cave for 3 weeks.*
- b. The passive voice is more difficult to understand
Example: *The project will have been completed before the deadline.*
- c. People think that using “to be” is a sign of the passive
Example: *Chef Jones had been preparing the restaurant's fantastic dinners for two years before he moved to Paris.*
- d. People think that using the passive is “lazy”
Example: *That castle has been visited by 24,000 tourists since its opening.*

h. Practice:

- a. We wish to suggest a structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.).
- b. Surgeons successfully performed a new experimental liver-transplant operation yesterday.
- c. We have made the usual chemical assumptions, namely, that each chain consists of phosphate diester groups joining beta-D-deoxyribofuranose residues with 3',5' linkages
- d. If it is assumed that the bases only occur in the structure in the most plausible tautomeric forms (that is, with the keto rather than the enol configurations) it is found that only specific pairs of bases can bond together.
- e. The aurora borealis can be observed in the early morning hours.
- f. Watching a framed, mobile world through a car’s windshield reminds me of watching a movie or TV.
- g. It has been found experimentally that the ratio of the amounts of adenine to thymine, and the ratio of guanine to cytosine, are always very close to unity for deoxyribose nucleic acid.
- h. Police are being notified that three prisoners have escaped.
- i. The unidentified victim was apparently struck during the early morning hours.
- j. The Head of the Internal Revenue Services advised the President that her agency was auditing certain members of Congress.