



Active and Passive Voice

In the active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action:

I	aced	the	exam.
Subject/actor	verb		object/thing acted on

In the passive voice, the object of the action becomes the subject of the sentence, and the actor appears in a prepositional phrase, or is absent from the sentence:

The exam	was aced	(by me).
Subject	verb	actor/object of prepositional phrase

- Use the active voice when the actor's identity is important.

Active:	The butler did it.
Passive:	It was done by the butler.

The first sentence is stronger; it sounds like an accusation. The second sentence is weaker; it sounds like the butler did nothing more sinister than a load of laundry.

- Use the active voice when you want to be direct and emphatic.

Active:	Management expects the staff to follow the rules.
Passive:	It is expected by Management that the rules will be followed by the staff.

In this instance, the active voice delivers the message more effectively.

- Use the passive voice when you do not need to tell the reader who is acting.

Active:	Ned will prosecute trespassers.
Passive:	Trespassers will be prosecuted.

In this case, it is not necessary to say who will be doing the prosecuting. Fear of being prosecuted, not fear of being prosecuted *by Ned*, will prevent most people from trespassing.

- Use the 'objective' passive for writing in disciplines such as the sciences.

Active: Dr. Cranium considered the drug to be a medical breakthrough, but after he tested the drug further, he found that it had serious side effects.

Passive: The drug was considered to be a medical breakthrough, but after further testing, it was found to have serious side effects.

Writers in the sciences often use the passive voice when they want to sound objective. In the first sentence, the active voice suggests that Dr. Cranium made an error in judgement. In the second sentence, the passive voice delivers important information about the drug without implying anything (either positive or negative) about Dr. Cranium.

Practice Exercise

Rewrite the following sentences by replacing passive verbs with active verbs, and by adding a subject if necessary.

1. The building has been left by Elvis.
2. When I was prosecuted by Ned, I felt very foolish.
3. A superb dinner was prepared by the famous chef.
4. The dog was given a bath, and the cat was rescued from the tree.
5. The story of the albatross will be told many times by the ancient mariner.
6. The sentiments of the speaker were applauded.
7. It was proven by Atticus that the crime was not committed by the accused.
8. The site will be excavated as soon as permission is granted by the local government.

Answers

1. Elvis has left the building.
2. When Ned prosecuted me, I felt very foolish.
3. The famous chef prepared a superb dinner.
4. Ben gave the dog a bath, and Jerry rescued the cat from the tree.
5. The ancient mariner will tell the story of the albatross many times.
6. The audience applauded the sentiments of the speaker.
7. Atticus proved that the accused did not commit the crime.
8. The archaeological team will excavate the site as soon as the local government grants them permission to do so.