



The Passive Voice

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In *The Elements of Style*, William Strunk Jr and E.B. White write:

The active voice is usually more direct and vigorous than the passive [voice].... The habitual use of the active voice ... makes for more forcible writing. This is true not only in narrative concerned principally with action but in writing of any kind. Many a tame sentence of description or exposition can be made lively and emphatic by substituting ... the active voice for [the passive voice]. (18)

By knowing the difference between the active voice and the passive voice, and by endeavouring to use the active voice as often as possible, a writer's sentences will be clearer, more concise, and more interesting.

The Passive Voice Explained

Passive-voice sentences often omit the agent, or the performer, of the action of the sentence.

× The boy was bitten.
object verb

Even when the passive-voice sentence includes the agent, it comes last. This arrangement results in a backwards-moving sentence, in which the passive recipient of the action precedes the active agent.

× The boy was bitten by the dog.
object verb subject
AGENT

In an active-voice sentence, the active agent of the action comes first. This arrangement results in a forwards-moving sentence that is more direct and succinct.

✓ The dog bit the boy.
subject verb object
AGENT

Notice that in a passive-voice sentence, an auxiliary verb and a past participle separates the subject and the object, and the object becomes part of an unnecessary prepositional phrase.

× The boy was bitten by the dog.
object aux. pp. prep. phrase subject
AGENT

In an active-voice sentence, by contrast, only a simple verb separates the subject and the object.

✓ The dog bit the boy.
subject verb object
AGENT

Therefore, to correct a passive-voice sentence to make it an active-voice sentence, rearrange the sentence to put the agent first.

- × *The Salterton Trilogy* was written between 1951 and 1958.
- ✓ Robertson Davies wrote *The Salterton Trilogy* between 1951 and 1958.

The Passive and Active Voices in the English Tenses

Remember that *voice* and *tense* are separate and distinct concepts. Active- and passive-voice sentences can be in any tense, so it is important to know the difference between *voice* and *tense*, as well as the syntactical differences between the various English tenses.

This chart is adapted from Capital Community College Foundation's *Guide to Grammar and Writing*.

Tense	× Passive Voice				✓ Active Voice	
	Object	Auxiliary		Past Participle	Subject / Agent	Sentence
		Singular	Plural			
Present	The play(s)	is	are	written	by Shakespeare.	Shakespeare writes the play(s).
Present Perfect	The play(s)	has been	have been	written	by Shakespeare.	Shakespeare has written the play(s).
Past	The play(s)	was	were	written	by Shakespeare.	Shakespeare wrote the play(s).
Past Perfect	The play(s)	had been	had been	written	by Shakespeare.	Shakespeare had written the play(s).
Future	The play(s)	will be	will be	written	by Shakespeare.	Shakespeare will write the play(s).
Future Perfect	The play(s)	will have been	will have been	written	by Shakespeare.	Shakespeare will have written the play(s).
Present Progressive	The play(s)	is being	are being	written	by Shakespeare.	Shakespeare is writing the play(s).
Past Progressive	The play(s)	was being	were being	written	by Shakespeare.	Shakespeare was writing the play(s).

Works Cited

"The Passive Voice." *Guide to Grammar and Writing*. Capital Community College Foundation, Web.

Strunk Jr, William, and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style*. 3rd ed., MacMillan, 1979.

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