

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE

What is the difference between active and passive voice?

In **active voice**, the subject does the acting:

The committee made the decision.

In **passive voice**, the subject is acted upon:

The decision was made (by the committee).

The subject decision in the second sentence does nothing. In other words, the subject is passive. It did no acting; it was acted upon. Writers may use the passive voice to avoid naming the actor. In fact, the actor may be unknown. Consider this sentence:

Somebody shot John F. Kennedy in 1963.

This sentence is in the active voice. Such a sentence emphasizes the subject somebody. The writer may not want to emphasize the actor in this case.

The passive voice, on the other hand, would allow a writer to emphasize the importance of the person or thing acted upon. Consider the following sentence:

John F. Kennedy was shot in 1963.

Such a sentence in the passive voice allows a writer to stress the importance of the person or event acted upon—in this case, John F. Kennedy.

In most writing situations, you should use the active rather than the passive voice because the active voice is more forceful and precise. Generally, use the passive voice only when it's not important for the reader to know who or what is doing the acting.

PASSIVE VOICE <i>Subject acted upon</i>	<i>+ verb "to be"</i>	<i>+ past participle</i>	<i>+ "by" phrase (optional)</i>
The race	was	won	(by the runner)
The fish	was	cooked	(by the chef)
The books	are	illustrated	(by the artist)

ACTIVE VOICE <i>Subject</i>	<i>verb</i>	<i>direct object</i>
The runner	won	the race.
The chef	cooked	the fish.
The artist	illustrated	the books.

The following paragraph is written with some verbs in the passive voice. Rewrite the paragraph, and change the verbs from the passive voice to the active voice. Supply new subjects for some sentences.

Last year a hurricane was experienced by my family and me for the first time. It was Hurricane Ellen, and much damage to our property and neighborhood was caused by its fierce winds of 200 miles per hour and its heavy rains. The old oak tree in our backyard was uprooted and hurled across the roof of our house, creating a large hole through which the rain poured in. Our living room was flooded by the water, which rose to a height of three feet. When we began to think that the worst of the storm was over, we heard a loud crash and looked out the window to see that our car had been hit by our neighbor's fallen tree, caving in the roof and breaking all the windows. Having recently moved to the East Coast from North Dakota, we thought that a hurricane was little more than a thunderstorm. Next time, when people in our area are advised to evacuate before a hurricane comes, I'm sure our family will be the first to leave.

Adapted from Pathways by Joyce M. Jarrett, et al., from The Writer's Workplace by Sandra and John Scarry.

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