

Active vs. Passive Voice

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Active and passive voice each have a place in writing—neither is grammatically incorrect—but it’s important to understand the difference and why active voice is often the better choice.

In sentences using active voice, the subject of the sentence is doing the action indicated by the verb. These sentences use active voice:

The police officers found the suspect.
God loves you.

Someone drank the last of the milk.
Carl bumped her!

To make these sentences passive, we can redirect the focus of the sentence from the original subject to the other noun in the sentence like this:

The suspect was found by the police.
You are loved by God.

The last of the milk was finished off (by someone).
She was bumped by Carl.

Passive voice combines a form of the verb “to be” with a past participle verb: *She is bumped; she was bumped; she will be bumped*. Sometimes passive voice uses the word “by” to show who did the action.

What’s the problem with passive voice? Sometimes nothing! For instance, you may want to use passive voice in the following situations.

- *You want to emphasize the receiver of the action.* In this case, perhaps you don’t care or know who stole the Mona Lisa: “The Mona Lisa was stolen in 1911.”
- *You want to remain objective.* You may want to avoid the first-person I or we; or perhaps you want to highlight the experiment rather than the scientists: “Exciting results were produced.”
- *You want to hide the blame in an awkward or sensitive situation:* “The dates were printed incorrectly.”

Most of the time, however, avoiding passive voice is a good idea; active voice helps to keep your writing clear, concise, and explicit.

Unclear: The town was razed.

Clearer: The town was razed by Vikings. (still passive)

Clear and concise: Vikings razed the town.

Unclear: A new president was elected.

Clearer: A new president was elected by the citizens of Afghanistan. (still passive)

Clear and concise: Afghanistan’s citizens elected a new president.

Unclear: Smoking is considered unsafe.

Clearer: Smoking is considered unsafe by the Surgeon General. (still passive)

Clear, concise, explicit: In 2010, the Surgeon General wrote an open letter decrying smoking as unsafe because of its direct effect on the lungs.

Unclear: *Pudd’nhead Wilson* and *Those Extraordinary Twins* are considered one novel.

Clearer: *Pudd’nhead Wilson* and *Those Extraordinary Twins* are considered one novel with two parts by some literary scholars.

Clear, concise, explicit: Literary scholars, including Catharine O’Connell and Sydney Berger, argue that because Twain resolves the primary conflict of *Pudd’nhead Wilson* at the end of *Those Extraordinary Twins*, the two sections are intrinsically linked into a single novel.