

Active & Passive Voice

To help you choose whether to write a sentence in the direct or indirect style, you should know about the **voice** of verbs. Verbs have two voices, active and passive. When the subject comes first, the voice is active. When the object comes first, the voice is passive:

Active: The buyer paid a large amount.

Passive: A large amount was paid by the buyer.

Active Voice

The direct writing style is called *active voice*, which means the subject *does* the verb's action.

Active: George kissed Twileen. [The subject *George* did the action – *kissed*.]

Active: Norway won 26 medals at the 1994 Winter Olympics. [The subject *Norway* did the action – *won*.]

Passive Voice

The opposite of *active* is *passive*.

The indirect writing style is called *passive voice*, which means the subject *receives* the verb's action.

The passive voice uses a form of the verb *to be*, which adds words to a sentence. In the example, the passive-voice sentence uses eight words, whereas the active-voice sentence uses only six to say the same thing. The words *was* and *by* are unnecessary to convey the meaning of the sentence. In fact, extra words usually clog meaning. So be sure to opt for the active voice when you have a choice.

At times, however, you have no choice:

Several items *have been taken*, but so far we don't know who took them.

The passive voice becomes necessary when you don't know (or don't want to say) who performed the action; the active voice is bolder and more direct.

Passive: Twileen was kissed by George. [The subject *Twileen* received the action – *was kissed*.]

Twenty-six medals were won by Norway at the 1994 Olympics.
[The subject *medals* received the action – *were won*.]

Since the required ingredients of a sentence are subject, verb, and independence, we can write complete sentences in the passive voice without mentioning who did the action.

Passive: Twileen was kissed. [This sentence has a subject and a verb and is independent; it is passive because the subject **received** the action.]

Twenty-six medals were won at the 1994 Winter Olympics. [This sentence is in the passive voice because the subject is the receiver even though the doer of the action, Norway, is not named.]

Active Jesse accurately prepared a spreadsheet of the accounts receivable.

Passive The accounts receivable spreadsheet was prepared accurately by Jesse.

The accounts receivable spreadsheet was prepared accurately.

Active George presented the report to the stockholders.

Passive The report was presented to the stockholders by George.

The report was presented to the stockholders.

Active or Passive Voice in Workplace Writing?

Use active, rather than passive, voice for most workplace writing. It is often more concise.

Fewer words are usually required for the active voice, it is more efficient, and it takes the reader from Point A to Point B in a straight line.

A → B

Use the passive voice for tact or emphasis.

Tact

You may want the reader to know about an error but prefer to omit the culprit's name.

Passive An error was made on the report.

Emphasis

Use the passive voice to emphasize the receiver of the action rather than the doer – or if you don't know who the doer is. The passive voice enables you to begin the sentence with the receiver and either leave out the doer or end with the doer. For example, the report is more important than the auditor in the following sentence:

Passive A report was presented to the stockholders by the auditor.

A report was presented to the stockholders.

Instant Test to Distinguish Active From Passive Voice

If “by someone” makes sense after the verb, the voice is passive. If “by someone” is already there, then you *know* it's passive.

Passive The book was purchased last week. [**Instant Test:** The book was purchased (by someone) last week. “By someone” makes sense after the verb.]

Active Dorothy Larson bought the book today. [**Instant Test:** Dorothy Larson bought (by someone) the book today. “By someone” after the verb doesn't make sense.]