

Active and Passive Voice

What's the difference?

Writers are sometimes puzzled by active versus passive voice, but a **few simple steps** will help you identify which of the two you're dealing with.

1. **Identify the verb** (the “action word”) in the sentence. For example, in the sentence below, “wrote” is the **verb**:
 - *Margaret Atwood **wrote** *The Handmaid's Tale*.*
1. Ask yourself, **who or what did the verb?** In the example above, you'd ask, “**Who** wrote?” The answer to this question is the **subject**—the performer of the action. In our example, the subject is **Margaret Atwood**.
2. Next, ask, “**who or what** was the verb **done to?**” or, “**Who or what received** the action?” In the example above, the question is, “What was written?” The answer—*The Handmaid's Tale*—is the **object** of the sentence—in this case, the thing that was written.
3. Finally, you can remind yourself that:
 - In **passive** voice, objects are verbed by subjects.
 - In **active** voice, subjects verb objects.
 - In the example above, you can see that the subject (Atwood) verbed (wrote) the object (*A Handmaid's Tale*)—so the sentence must be written in active voice.
 - If the sentence were in passive voice, it would look like this:
 - *A Handmaid's Tale was written by Margaret Atwood.*

These few steps might seem awkward at first, but once you learn them, they will no longer puzzle you. Remember to **identify the verb** first, before you do anything else. Then remember that regardless of the order of subject / verb / object in the sentence, **the subject always performs** the action, and **the object always receives** the action. Finally, look at the sentence to see if the subject appears before the verb (active voice), or if the object does (passive voice).

A note: Passive voice has nothing to do with verb tense. A passive sentence can be written in the past, present, or future tense.

Which voice should you use?

It depends. Neither voice is more **scholarly** in tone than the other; they both have their uses in academic writing. We generally recommend, with the odd exception, that writers choose one voice and keep it **consistent** throughout a piece of writing. As an exercise, **you might like to** choose a paragraph of your own writing and try writing it once in active voice, then again in passive voice, to see the differences. You can also observe which voice has predominance in the articles and books in your academic discipline.

Many writers and editors—and readers—prefer **active voice** because it tends to be **clearer and more concise**. It can also contribute to a more engaging style that more closely parallels how we speak. In addition, active voice does not **hide the subject** as passive voice sometimes does, as in the example below:

- *Election funds were misused and voters suppressed.*

Who misused the funds and suppressed the voters? It sounds as if the writer is trying to hide the identity of the people responsible. The active voice would reveal all:

- *Council members Ticklepenny and Nettlefitch **misused the funds and suppressed voters.***

However, some academic disciplines, particularly in the **sciences**, continue to use primarily **passive voice**, because it emphasizes the verb and object rather than the subject. Science writing is often more concerned with processes (verbs) and results (objects) than with the people (subjects) engaging in the processes and producing the results. Compare the following two sentences:

- *The liquids **were combined** and the resulting mixture **was cooled.*** (passive)
- *My lab partner and I **combined** the liquids and then **cooled** the resulting mixture.* (active)

In this context, writing in the active voice clutters the sentence with unnecessary information (“my lab partner and I”). Passive voice allows the writer to focus on the results of the experiment.

Some scientific disciplines encourage the use of both active and passive voices, depending on the context of the writing. For example, you might use passive voice to write the methods section of a lab report, but the active voice to write the introduction or discussion sections.