

Active Voice and Passive Voice

Using the active voice can create clear, concise sentences. Passive voice is less direct than active voice. Passive sentences are usually wordier than active sentences, and they can clutter your paper with unnecessary words. Passive sentences can also leave readers wanting more information.

Distinguishing between active sentences and passive sentences

In active sentences, the subject of the sentence performs the action described in the sentence. In passive sentences, the subject of the sentence is acted upon. All passive sentences contain a form of the verb “be” followed by a past participial. For most verbs (called “regular verbs”), the past participial is the verb with *-ed* added to the end.

Passive sentence with a regular verb: “The ramifications of the new regulations **were explained** by the professor.”

Passive sentence with an irregular verb: “The ramifications of the new regulations **were understood** by the professor.”

Passive sentences often use a “by” phrase at the end of the sentence to indicate who or what is performing the action. Many passive sentences, however, omit the “by” phrase if who or what is performing the action is unknown, unimportant, or obvious.

Passive sentence without “by” phrase: “The business will be paid on a monthly basis.”

Passive sentence with a “by” phrase: “The business will be paid on a monthly basis by the tenant.”

Active sentence without a “by” phrase: “The tenant will pay the business on a monthly basis.”

Active sentence with a “by” phrase: “The tenant will pay the business on a monthly basis by cash or check.”

The first sentence provides some information, but it does not say who will pay the business. While the second sentence answers that question, the active version of the sentence is less wordy. The active sentences focus on the action of the tenant paying, whereas the passive sentences focus on the business receiving payment.

Changing passive sentences to active sentences

You can change a passive sentence to an active sentence in three steps:

First, move the passive sentence's subject into the active sentence's direct object position.

Passive sentence	Active sentence
The financial statements (<i>subject</i>) are prepared by Sarah.	Sarah prepares the financial statements (<i>direct object</i>)

Next, remove the "be" verb. You may need to change to form of the main verb, as in this sentence.

Passive sentence	Active Sentence
The financial statements are prepared (" <i>be</i> " verb + <i>past participial</i>) by Sarah.	Sarah prepares (<i>main verb</i>) the financial statements.

Finally, place the object of the "by" phrase in the passive sentence in the subject position and delete the word "by."

Passive sentence	Active Sentence
The financial statements are prepared by Sarah (" <i>by</i> " + <i>object of preposition</i>).	Sarah (<i>subject</i>) prepares the financial statements.

To change passive sentences that don't have a "by" phrase to active sentences, you must add a subject to the active sentence.

Passive sentence	Active Sentence
The audit was conducted.	Ernst & Young conducted the audit.

Passive voice isn't ALWAYS bad!

In your academic writing, you should use active voice in most of your sentences. Active sentences are generally clearer and more succinct than passive sentences. In some cases, however, a passive sentence is preferable to an active sentence. For example, when the agent performing the action is unknown, is not the focus of the sentence, or is obvious, the passive is acceptable or even preferable.

Acceptable passive sentence (subject is not known and is not the focus of the sentence):

“The parts for our new prototype were made in the United States.”

Acceptable passive sentence (subject is obvious; the IRS defines terms in the tax code):

“For tax purposes, a household is defined as a *principal place of abode*.”