

# HOW TO USE THE PASSIVE VOICE

..... a practical handout

## The Passive Voice

The passive voice is not grammatically incorrect, but rather it is a stylistic choice. Many writers use the passive voice in formal texts to shift the emphasis in a sentence, to explain step-by-step processes, in technical writing, or to compliment writing strategies.

The passive voice is used to emphasize the person or object that **experiences an action (also called a direct object)**, rather than emphasizing the person or object that **performs the action**. In other words, the most important thing or person in the sentence becomes the focus of the sentence.

Active . . . . . **Ben** stole **the candy canes** from the event.

- The focus is on “Ben” since it is in the main subject position.

Passive . . . . . **The candy canes** were stolen from the event by **Ben**.

- The focus is now on “the candy canes” since it is in the main subject position.

Active . . . . . **The thief** took **the earrings** from the cabinet.

- The focus is on “the thief” since it is in the main subject position.

Passive . . . . . **The earrings** were taken from the cabinet by **the thief**.

- The focus us now on “the earrings” since it is in the main subject position.

Active . . . . . **The leaf** absorbs **sunlight** during photosynthesis.

Passive . . . . . **Sunlight** is absorbed by **the leaf** during photosynthesis.

Active . . . . . **The machine** brews **the coffee grounds** into coffee.

Passive . . . . . **The coffee grounds** are brewed into coffee by **the machine**.

Each set of sentences explain the same event but using either the active voice or the passive voice results in different meanings. The meanings are determined by whether the emphasis is placed on:

the experiencer of the action:

**candy canes / earrings / sunlight / the coffee grounds**

or the performer of the action:

**Ben / the thief / the leaf / the machine**

## Grammatical Structure

The passive voice is determined by the verbs used in a sentence. The formula for passive verb phrases is:

**form of “be” verb + past participle**

*Note:*

- Although not always the case, the passive voice is typically marked with “by” before the performer of the action in a sentence.
- Active sentences can only be turned into passive sentences IF the sentence contains a direct object, or the subject that is experiencing the action.
- A review on “be verbs” and “past participles”:

-Be verbs (also called helping, auxiliary, or linking verbs) show action of a state of being: *am, be, was, is, were, are.*

-Past participles are the past form of a verb that end in -ed/-en used in passive sentences: *looked, baked, eaten, stolen*

Active . . . . . Ben *stole* the candy canes from the event

Passive . . . . . The candy canes **were** stolen from the event by Ben

Active . . . . . The thief *took* the earrings from the cabinet

Passive . . . . . The earrings **were** taken from the cabinet by the thief

Active . . . . . The leaf *absorbs* sunlight during photosynthesis

Passive . . . . . Sunlight **is** absorbed by the leaf during photosynthesis

Active . . . . . The machine *brews* the coffee grounds into coffee

Passive . . . . . The coffee grounds **are** brewed into coffee by the machine

## Citation Style

Be aware that only certain citation style conventions allow writers to use the passive voice:

- APA (6th edition) states that active voice is preferred over the passive voice.
- MLA (8th edition) accepts both the active and the passive voice.
- Chicago Manual (15th edition) accepts both the active and the passive voice.

Make sure to check with your professor to make sure that passive voice is appropriate for the assignment. Then, check with the current edition of the citation style to ensure you are up to date.

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### References

"Active and Passive Voice." *British Council*. <https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/english-grammar/active-and-passive-voice> Accessed 5 Nov. 2018.

American Psychological Association. *Publication Manual*. 6th edition. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015.

"Passive Voice." *Education First*. <https://www.ef.edu/english-resources/english-grammar/passive-voice/> Accessed 10 Oct. 2018.

*The Chicago Manual of Style*. 15th edition. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2003.