

Active & Passive Voice

Someday you may receive this feedback from an instructor: “Use the active voice.” But what does that mean? If you are being asked to use the **active** voice, that means that you’re currently using the **passive** voice. Take part of the previous sentence as an example:

You are being asked to use the active voice.

Most English sentences follow this pattern: *subject + verb + object*. What’s the subject of the sentence above? *You*. What is the verb? Well, *you* aren’t doing anything. You are *receiving* the action instead. The real agent of the action, the professor, is absent from the sentence, and you’re passively sitting there, absorbing their request.

Now look at this one:

You’re currently using the passive voice.

Subject of the sentence? **You**. What is the action? **Using**. Now you are doing something. Thus the active voice.

Generally speaking, your writing is stronger when you use the active voice. You have more room for action verbs (as opposed to verbs of being).

In the passive voice, the subject of the sentence is receiving the action rather than performing the action. The passive voice does have its place:

- In much science writing, the research, not the researcher, is more important: **Growth was tracked across a five-year period**. (Be aware that much current science writing uses the active voice more frequently than the passive voice.)
- When you aren’t sure who or what (the agent) performed the action: **My car was stolen!**
- When you don’t want to reveal the actor: **The information was leaked to the press.**

The passive voice always uses a form of the verb “to be” (is, am, are, was, were, etc.), but not all sentences containing a form of “to be” are in the passive voice.

The king was being crowned at sunrise. (Passive voice)

The queen was pleased. (Simple use of a “to be” verb)

The people cheered for their new king. (Active voice)

While we’re at it, try to use active action verbs, too. Instead of “They went to the store,” try “They sauntered to the store.”

Better yet, be as descriptive as possible for the entire sentence: **With the sun hot on their shoulders, they sauntered to the store in search of cool, refreshing beverages.**

Here are a few more examples.

Passive voice: **The secret formula was stolen by the sinister scientist.**

In the active voice, the sentence is more succinct but also emphasizes the scientist over the act of stealing:

The sinister scientist stole the secret formula.

If you feel the act of stealing is more important than the thief's identity, use the passive voice. Otherwise, use the active voice.

Here's another one:

Passive voice: An investigation was requested by the FBI.

Pretty passive. Get those FBI people to work right away:

The FBI requested an investigation.

One more:

Passive voice: The secret formula was found in a jeweled box under an antique, upholstered couch in the Museum of Science and Industry.

For this one, we may not need an agent. But here's the active voice:

The FBI rookie discovered the secret formula in a jeweled box under an antique, upholstered couch in the Museum of Science and Industry.

This example introduces another wordiness issue (strings of prepositional phrases), but we'll save that for another day. In the meantime, give that rookie a raise!