Active vs. Passive Voice

The voice in a sentence tells the reader whether the subject performs or receives the verb’s action.

Active Voice
In sentences with active voice, the subject performs the action and the receiver takes the action of the verb.

EXAMPLE: Molly (agent/subject) cashed (verb) her check (receiver) at the bank.

Passive Voice
In sentences with passive voice, the subject is acted upon by the verb. This means the agent of the sentence comes after the verb. The verb in passive voice takes a form of the verb “to be” and the past participle of the main verb. “Be” Verbs: be, am, is, are, was, were, been, being

EXAMPLES: The check (receiver/subject) was cashed (verb) by Molly (agent) at the bank.
The check (receiver/subject) was cashed (verb) at the bank. (no agent)

Choosing between Active and Passive Voice

Choosing Active Voice
Use active voice in most writing because it engages the reader more effectively than passive voice.

• Active voice is direct.

ACTIVE: John asked Teresa to dinner.
PASSIVE: Teresa was asked to dinner by John.

• Verbs in the active voice are more lively because they emphasize the agent of the action.

ACTIVE: The batter strikes the ball with the bat.
PASSIVE: The ball is struck by the batter with the bat.

Choosing Passive Voice
In general, use passive voice sparingly. However, passive voice may be used in the following cases:

• When emphasizing the receiver is more important than emphasizing the agent of the action.

PASSIVE: The president was elected three years ago.
ACTIVE: Voters elected the president three years ago.

Passive voice is more effective because the president being elected is the most important part of this sentence, rather than the voters casting their votes.

• When the agent is unknown.

PASSIVE: The money was stolen last night.
ACTIVE: Someone stole the money last night.

The passive is more effective because it emphasizes the action of the money being stolen rather than focusing on the unknown agent.

• When your discipline wants writing to appear objective and fact-based. Scientists and business writing often use passive voice.

PASSIVE: The check was mailed late.
ACTIVE: I mailed the check late.
Passive voice is more effective because it keeps the sentence from sounding personal or accusatory. The important part of the sentence is that the check was mailed late, not who mailed it.

Transforming Passive Sentences into Active Sentences
You can transform passive voice to active voice by making the agent perform the verb. The following steps show how to transform a sentence.

**EXAMPLE:** The ice cream cones (receiver/subject) were eaten (verb) by the children (agent).

**Step Number One:**
Make the agent in the by phrase the subject of the active sentence. Eliminate the word by if necessary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PASSIVE</th>
<th>ACTIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The ice cream cones were eaten by the children.</td>
<td>The children ...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Step Number Two:**
Change the verb from a “to be” form to the appropriate active tense.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PASSIVE</th>
<th>ACTIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The ice cream cones were eaten by the children.</td>
<td>The children ate ...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Step Number Three:**
Make the subject of the passive sentence the receiver of the active sentence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PASSIVE</th>
<th>ACTIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The ice cream cones were eaten by the children.</td>
<td>The children ate the ice cream.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Transforming Active Sentences into Passive Sentences
You can change active voice sentences into passive voice by reversing the steps listed above.

- Make the receiver of the active sentence the subject of the passive sentence.
- Transform the verb into a form of to be plus the past participle of the main verb.
- Put the subject/agent of the active sentence into a by phrase or omit it.

A Few Cautions

- If your original sentence contains a modifying phrase or a phrase that describes a specific element in the sentence, make sure you keep the phrase next to that element when you change from active to passive voice. If the phrase is left in the wrong spot, the sentence may be unclear.

  **EXAMPLE:** The ice cream cones from the store were eaten by the children.
  INCORRECT: The children from the store ate the ice cream cones. (describes the children)
  CORRECT: The children ate the ice cream cones from the store. (describes ice cream cones)

- Avoid shifting from active to passive voice in the same sentence because it can cause awkwardness and confusion.

  INCORRECT: The children ate the ice cream, but it was bought by Peter. (voice shifts)
  CORRECT: The children ate the ice cream, but Peter bought it. (voice is consistent)