



TCS Writing Centre

The Active and Passive Voices

In **the active voice**, the subject (who or what a clause or sentence is about) performs the action expressed by the clause or sentence's main verb.

The fox jumped over the fence.

In this sentence, which uses **the active voice**, the *fox* is the subject and *jumped* is the main verb. It is easy for us to understand that it is the fox that performed the jump because the subject of the sentence (the fox) comes before the sentence's main verb (jumped).

Writing in the active voice focuses our attention on what the subject of a clause or sentence is doing or being. In the case of the sentence above, our attention is drawn to what the fox did.

On the other hand, **the passive voice** directs our attention to the people or things affected by an action.

The fence was jumped over by the fox.

In this sentence, which uses **the passive voice**, our attention is focused on the fence and the fact that it has been jumped over. Both this sentence and the one above it communicate the same information, but they differ in what they draw our attention to. This is achieved by using either the active voice or the passive voice.

You will often hear your teachers say they'd like you to avoid the passive voice in your academic writing. The main reason for this is that the passive voice allows writers to avoid identifying the **agent** of a clause or sentence. The **agent** of a clause or sentence is **who or what performs the clause or sentence's main verb**.

The Treaty of Versailles was signed on June 28, 1919.

This sentence, which uses **the passive voice**, does not identify *who* or *what* signed the Treaty of Versailles. It thus fails to identify an agent. In order to change this sentence into the active voice, one needs to begin by identifying who or what signed the Treaty.

Germany and the Allied Powers signed the Treaty of Versailles on June 28, 1919.

You can see why teachers (and readers in general) often prefer the active voice over the passive voice: the active voice provides readers with important information that can be left out when using the passive voice.

A clause or sentence written in **the passive voice** is always constructed according to the following pattern: (1) subject, (2) form of *be*, (3) past participle of main verb, (4) additional information (if included), and (5) agent (if included). Consider the following chart, for example:

Clause/Sentence Structure of the Passive Voice				
Subject	Form of <i>Be</i>	Past Participle of Main Verb	Additional Information	Agent
The common cold	is	caused		by a virus.
The bird	is being	chased		by the cat.
The car	was	hit		by a truck.
A decision	has been	reached.		Unstated
Wheat	is	grown	in Alberta.	Unstated
Millions of dollars	were	cut	from the budget.	Unstated
The exam	will be	written	tomorrow.	Unstated

Note how the last four sentences fail to identify an agent. Again, this is the main reason that teachers are often critical of the passive voice in academic writing.

On the other hand, a clause or sentence written in **the active voice** is constructed by using a different pattern: (1) agent (also the clause or sentence's subject), (2) main verb (in appropriate tense), (3) object, and (4) additional information (if included). Here are the sentences from the chart above changed into the active voice:

Agent (Subject)	Main Verb (in appropriate tense)	Object	Additional Information
A virus	causes	the common cold.	
The cat	is chasing	the bird.	
A truck	hit	the car.	
The judge	has reached	a decision.	
Farmers	grow	wheat	in Alberta.
The government	cut	millions of dollars	from the budget.
The students	will write	the exam	tomorrow.

Note how the last four sentences required the writer to come up with an appropriate agent or subject for the sentence. This is usually the most difficult thing to do when changing a clause or sentence from the passive voice to the active voice. However, if the writer knows who or what the agent is, all she/he needs to do is begin with the agent as the clause or sentence's subject.

The Active and Passive Voices Worksheet

Using the tip sheet on the active and the passive voices, identify the (1) subject, (2) form of *be*, (3) past participle of main verb, (4) additional information (if included), and (5) agent (if included) in each of the following eight sentences (all of these sentences are written in the passive voice). In order to identify each part of these passive-voice sentences, underline and label each part accordingly.

1. The experiment was carried out.
2. The logs are floated downstream.
3. The project is to be handed in on February 6.
4. The examination will be written in the gym.
5. Mistakes have been made.
6. Many European cities were destroyed during World War II.
7. The novel is written by Margaret Atwood.
8. The city was surrounded by the enemy forces.

Now that you've identified the various parts of these passive-voice sentences, re-write each one of them so they're in the active voice. Remember to begin each sentence with an agent (which will also be the sentence's subject). If an agent is not identified in the passive-voice sentence from the other side of the sheet, you'll need to create one that's appropriate (e.g., *A decision has been reached* [passive voice] could become *The judge has reached a decision* [active voice]). Once you've started your sentence with its agent/subject, add the sentence's main verb in its appropriate tense. Lastly, complete the sentence by adding the object and any additional information.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.