

Active vs. Passive Voice

Use the **active voice** whenever possible.

- In **active voice**, the **subject performs the action**.
- In **passive voice**, the **subject receives the action**.

Active: The candidate *believes* that Congress *must place* a ceiling on the budget.

Passive: *It is believed* by the candidate that a ceiling *must be placed* on the budget by Congress.

Active: Researchers earlier *showed* that high stress *can cause* heart attacks.

Passive: *It was* earlier *demonstrated* that heart attacks *can be caused* by high stress.

Active: The dog *bit* the man.

Passive: The man *was bitten* by the dog.

Converting sentences to active voice

Look for a "by" phrase (e.g., "by the dog" in the last example above). If you find one, the sentence may be in the passive voice. Rewrite the sentence so that the subject buried in the "by" clause is closer to the beginning of the sentence.

If the subject of the sentence is somewhat anonymous, see if you can use a general term, such as "researchers," or "the study," or "experts in this field."

When to use passive voice

- ✓ To emphasize the action rather than the actor
After long debate, the proposal *was endorsed* by the long-range planning committee.
- ✓ To keep the subject and focus consistent throughout a passage
The data processing department recently presented what proved to be a controversial proposal to expand its staff. After long debate, the proposal *was endorsed* by
- ✓ To be tactful by not naming the actor
The procedures *were* somehow *misinterpreted*.
- ✓ To describe a condition in which the actor is unknown or unimportant
Every year, thousands of people *are diagnosed* as having cancer.
- ✓ To create an authoritative tone
Visitors *are not allowed* after 9:00 p.m.

