

Active and Passive Voice

The **voice** of a verb indicates whether a subject is acting or being acted upon. Voice can be either active or passive. One of the ways in which you can determine whether a sentence is active or passive is to ask yourself, "Who did it?"

ACTIVE VOICE

If the subject of the sentence has performed the action, then it is probably **active voice**. In the example below, the subject of the sentence (*Julie*) performed an action (*tripped*) on the object (*the professor*).



Julie tripped the professor. (ACTIVE VOICE)

Here are more examples of active voice; notice that the direction of the action is toward the right.



My teacher always gives difficult assignments.

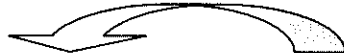


I inserted the glass tubing into the rubber stopper without using the lubricant.

In both of these sentences, you should ask yourself, "Who gives?" and "Who inserted?" Since the sentences are in active voice, the answer to the question will be the subject of the sentence (*my teacher* and *I*).

PASSIVE VOICE

In **passive voice**, the subject is acted upon by someone or something else. Therefore, the subject of the sentence does not provide the answer to the question, "Who did it?" Instead, the person or thing that performs the action is either absent from the sentence or sandwiched into a prepositional phrase that begins with the word *by*. In the following example, the subject (*the professor*) is acted upon (*tripped*) by an outside force (*Julie*).



The professor was tripped by Julie. (PASSIVE VOICE)

Look at these examples of passive voice and notice how the action moves toward the left:



Difficult assignments are always given by my teacher.

(Notice how awkward the above sentence is)

The glass tubing was inserted into the rubber stopper without using the lubricant.

(Note that in this sentence the person performing the action has been eliminated entirely)

WHEN SHOULD I USE PASSIVE VOICE?

Active voice tends to be more direct and less wordy than passive voice, so in most cases, you should choose an active voice construction over a passive one. However, in some circumstances, passive voice is actually more effective than active voice, and writers need to know the situations in which they should use passive voice.

1. Use passive voice for emphasis:

Compare the following two sentences:

The president of the corporation also witnessed the brash theft. (ACTIVE)

The brash theft was also witnessed by the president of the corporation. (PASSIVE)

