

ACTIVE & PASSIVE VERBS

We can view the action of a sentence in two ways without changing the facts reported.

Example: Mary was kissed by John.

John kissed Mary.

The difference between these two sentences is that the verb of the first is in the passive voice, whereas the verb of the second is in the active voice. Voice is simply the property of the verb that shows whether the subject acts (active voice) or is acted upon (passive voice). A verb with a direct object is in the active voice. When the direct object is converted into a subject, as in the examples above and below, the verb must be converted into the passive voice. The subject of an active verb acts; the subject of a passive verb does not act.

Examples:

Passive Voice	Active Voice
The detective was murdered by the butler.	The butler murdered the detective.
John is chosen by Priscilla.	Priscilla chooses John.
This lesson must be learned by Ed.	Ed must learn this lesson.
The concert was enjoyed by everyone.	Everyone enjoyed the concert.
The novel's theme is expressed by this passage.	This passage expresses the novel's theme.

Note that a verb in passive voice always consists of more than one part:

- 1) some form of "to be," and
- 2) a past participle. Many writers feel that active verbs should be used whenever possible.

Too many passive verbs make a passage wordy and flabby. The active voice keeps prose forceful, direct and concise.

However, neither active nor passive voice is used exclusively, **and the passive voice may be preferable when:**

- 1) The agent causing the action is either unknown or omitted.

Examples:

- The house was vandalized.

- Rome was not built in a day.
- The police were totally misled.
- The grammar book had been misplaced among the bedtime stories.

2) The agent is less important than the person or thing acted upon. The writer can add emphasis in this case by using the passive voice.

Examples:

- Coffee is drunk by more people than any other hot drink. (The emphasis is on the coffee.)
- More people drink coffee than any other hot drink. (The emphasis is on the people.)

3) There is a series of verbs and the author wishes to maintain parallelism.

Example:

- The windows had been left open, the old trunk had been ransacked, and the food had been devoured by rats.