

Mount Saint Vincent University  
**Writing Resource Centre**

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**Handout Topic:**  
**Passive and Active Voice**

Active / Passive Voice Form

In an active sentence, the subject is before the predicate (verb and object).

e.g. Global warming, deforestation, and pollution *destroy* **the earth's natural resources**.

(Subject)

(Verb)

(Object)

In a passive sentence, the subject of the sentence is placed after the verb in the object position.

e.g. **The earth's natural resources** *are destroyed* by global warming, deforestation, and pollution.

(Object in subject position)

(Verb)

(Subject in object position)

The passive voice is formed using the verb "to be" + the past participle.

Examples of the VERB "TO BE": *am, is, are, was, were, been, being*

Examples of the PAST PARTICIPLE: *seen, gotten, lived, worked, bought, taught, loved, caught, ect..*

Passive

She was being watched by the police.

The house is being taken care of by the neighbors.

A bomb was detonated in the hotel lobby.

The project will be completed before Saturday.

Active

The police were watching her.

The neighbors are taking care of the house.

Someone detonated a bomb in the hotel lobby.

Someone will complete the project before Saturday.

Sometimes the subject disappears completely in the passive voice:

*Pride and Prejudice* was written in 1813. (Writer of the book is absent)

Sometimes the subject remains, after the preposition "by"

*Pride and Prejudice* was written by Jane Austen in 1813.

## What's the difference?

Understanding the difference between active and passive voice allows you to control your writing style.

Both styles have their appropriate uses. Consider the active sentence, "I love you", versus the passive "You are loved by me". Which is stronger? Which one would you rather hear? Some students think that using the passive voice makes them sound more academic, but (as in the above example) when it is misused, it just sounds wordy. On the other hand, sometimes the passive voice is more appropriate. Imagine that you are writing an article about cotton. Is it better to write "People have used cotton for thousands of years" or "Cotton has been used for thousands of years"? In this situation, the passive construction is better because the writer's topic remains in the foreground of the sentence and the actors (people) are implied, so they don't really need to be included in the sentence. Generally, the active voice conveys meaning more clearly, concisely, and interestingly, and a writer, when faced with the choice, should favor the active voice over the passive voice. However, there are four writing situations in which the passive voice is more appropriate:

### **1) When the subject is unimportant.**

In scientific papers, for example, a writer might use passive voice to highlight the results of the study or experiment rather than him/herself.

e.g. The blood sample was tested for infectious diseases and labeled accordingly;

However, scientific writing guides increasingly recommend the use of active voice, even if it necessitates the use of first person pronouns. Check with your instructor.

In a more general context, as a stylistic choice, the passive voice may be appropriate. For example, in an article about Barak Obama you would structure sentences to keep him in the foreground, requiring (perhaps) the occasional use of the passive voice:

e.g. Barak Obama was elected by the American people in November, 2008.

However, if your paper was not about Obama but about, say, the voting patterns of Americans, you would keep the sentence in the active voice:

e.g. The American people elected Barak Obama in November, 2008.

**2) When the subject is unknown.**

e.g. A Halifax woman was murdered late last night. Police say there are no suspects.

**3) When you want to downplay the importance of the subject.** (This strategy is much loved by politicians because it allows them to admit mistakes without naming those responsible).

e.g. Inaccurate information about the presence of Weapons of Mass Destruction was relayed.

Or

The plaintiff was shot in the face while hunting (not Dick Cheney shot the plaintiff in the face while hunting!)

**4) When there are two verbs with the same subject, make the second verb passive.**

e.g. Dick Cheney shot someone in the face, and was awarded a slap on the wrist.

Although the active voice is usually better, the passive voice has its place too. After you have written your rough draft, and after you have revised the content of your work, you should assess your use of active or passive voice as a part of the proofreading process. If you find you are overusing the passive voice, it is very easy to change. First, figure out who or what is the subject, and then let the subject perform the verb.

Exercises

Change the sentences below to active or passive voice, whichever is most appropriate.

- 1) About one hundred students are helped by the Writing Centre each semester.
- 2) My grandmother got dementia, and took to a Nursing Home.
- 3) The poll workers miscounted the votes.
- 4) The new library is going to be designed by the architectural firm, Fowler, Bauld, and Mitchell.
- 5) Someone broke into the Quinpool Road Superstore last night.
- 6) The food for the physics conference will be prepared by Aramark.

