

## Active Voice vs. Passive Voice

The concept of **voice** in English grammar refers to the relationship between the subject, verb, and object in a sentence. Let's start by defining those terms:

Subject: The noun "doing" the action of the sentence. **Example: My dad bakes cookies.**

Verb: The action of the sentence. **Example: My dad bakes cookies.**

Object: The noun "receiving" the action of the sentence. **Example: My dad bakes cookies.**

More specifically, voice is concerned with which noun—the one doing the action or the one receiving the action—receives the focus of a sentence. Consider this sentence:

**The dog chased the cat.**

In this sentence, "dog" is the subject. It is the noun doing the chasing. In contrast, "cat" is the object: it is the noun being chased. This sentence is also in the **active voice** because the dog—the one doing the action—receives the focus. But suppose we rewrote our sentence like this:

**The cat was chased by the dog.**

Notice that we haven't changed the meaning of this sentence: the dog is still doing the chasing, and the cat is still being chased. What HAS changed, however, is which animal receives the focus: it's now the cat. In fact, with this revision, we've now made "cat" our subject, and we've turned "dog" into an object—more specifically, an object of the preposition "by" (we'll come back to that).

Our revised sentence is in the **passive voice**, which means the noun *receiving* the action—rather than *doing* the action—is our subject.

### How to Form the Passive Voice

To convert an active voice verb to a passive voice verb, you must do three things:

1. Start with the appropriate form of the verb "to be." This form will depend on the tense of your main verb (past, present, future). Examples:

**She runs the race. → The race is run by her.** (present tense)

**She ran the race. → The race was run by her.** (past tense)

**She will run the race. → The race will be run by her.** (future tense)

2. Next, add the **past participle** form of your main verb. Often, the past participle will be the same as the past tense form of the verb. Examples:

Present	Past	Past Participle	Active Voice to Passive Voice
make	made	made	We made our bed. → Our bed was made by us.
dance	danced	danced	I dance the tango. → The tango is danced by me.
read	read	read	They will read a book. → A book will be read by them.

Unfortunately, this isn't true for all verbs, and overtime, you will have to learn the past participle for every verb. One helpful rule of thumb is that most verbs whose past tense includes an "a" change the "a" to a "u" in the past participle form. Examples:

Present	Past	Past Participle	Active Voice to Passive Voice
run	ran	run	She ran the race. → The race was run by her.
sink	sank	sunk	The sub sinks the ship. → The ship is sunk by the sub.
drink	drank	drunk	We will drink milk. → Milk will be drunk by us.

Other past participles barely resemble the past tense form and will have to be memorized. Examples:

Present	Past	Past Participle	Active Voice to Passive Voice
eat	ate	eaten	He ate a burrito. → A burrito was eaten by him.
write	wrote	written	You write a letter. → A letter is written by you.
do	did	done	They will do work. → Work will be done by them.

3. Finally, simply add the word “by.”

### The Passive Voice, Style, and Rhetoric

The active voice is generally preferred to the passive voice because it is more clear and direct. Notice that “The dog chased the cat” is two words shorter than “The cat was chased by the dog,” even though both sentences mean the same thing.

However, there is often stylistic value in favoring the passive voice. Especially in disciplines like the sciences, writing tends to focus on the results of the research—what was found—rather than the individuals conducting the research—who did the finding. Therefore, the passive voice often works better for writing in those disciplines.

Additionally, there is occasionally rhetorical value in using the passive voice instead of the active voice. The passive voice, unlike the active voice, allows you to completely eliminate the noun doing the action from the sentence. Let’s return to our earlier sentence:

**Active voice: The dog chased the cat.**

**Passive voice: The cat was chased by the dog.**

The phrase “by the dog” is a **prepositional phrase**, a stretch of text that begins with a **preposition** (e.g., in, on, by, at) and continues through the next noun in the sentence—in this case, “dog.” Since they will never contain the subject or verb of a sentence, prepositional phrases can always be removed from a sentence without changing the grammaticality of the sentence. Let’s try that:

**The cat was chased ~~by the dog~~. → The cat was chased.**

This would be rhetorically useful if we, for whatever reason, wanted to hide from the reader who or what did the chasing. Here’s another example that often comes up in the real world:

**Active voice: The president made some mistakes.**

**Passive voice: Some mistakes were made.**

Which one do you think the president’s lawyers would use in his/her defense?

Note: As with any rhetorical maneuver, be careful when using the passive voice in this way. While it might work on some people, anyone in your audience who recognizes that you are deliberately obscuring information like this will see you as dishonest and untrustworthy.

This resource was prepared by the Cottey College Writing Center.

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