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publicity, or moral rights may also have the material. There are many types of writing styles a writer can adopt when writing a specific writing called a passive voice. The passive voice is a grammatical construction where the object of an action becomes the subject of the sentence. In passive voice sentences, the focus shifts from who is performing the action (the actor) to the recipient of the action. The actor is often either omitted or included in a prepositional phrase starting with "by." The structure typically involves the verb "to be" in various tenses, followed by the past participle of the main verb. Here's a basic formula: Subject+form of 'be'+past participle+(by+agent) TenseActive Voice FormulaPassive Voice FormulaSimple Presents + V1 (s/es) + OS + am/is/are + V3 + by OSimple PastS + V2 + OS + was/were + V3 + by OSimple FutureS + will + V1 + OS + will be + V3 + by OPresent ContinuousS + am/is/are + V-ing + OS + am/is/are + being + V3 + by OPast ContinuousS + was/were + V-ing + OS + was/were + being + V3 + by OFuture ContinuousS + will be + V-ing + ORarely used in passive voicePresent PerfectS + has/have + V3 + OS + has/have been + V3 + by OPast PerfectS + had + V3 + OS + had been + V3 + by OFuture PerfectS + will have + V3 + OS + will have been + V3 + by OPresent Perfect Cont.S + has/have been + V-ing + OS + has/have been being + V3 + by OPast Perfect Cont.S + had been + V-ing + ORarely used in passive voiceInfinitiveto + V1 + Oto be + V3 + by OGerundV-ing + Obeing + V3 + by OModal VerbsS + modal (can, must, etc.) + V1 + OS + modal + be + V3 + by O TenseActive VoicePassive VoiceSimple PresentThey cook the meal.The meal is cooked.Simple PastThey cooked the meal.The meal was cooked.Future SimpleThey will cook the meal.The meal will be cooked.Present ContinuousThey are cooking the meal.The meal is being cooked.Past ContinuousThey were cooking the meal.The meal was being cooked.Present PerfectThey have cooked the meal.The meal has been cooked.Past PerfectThey had cooked the meal.The meal had been cooked.Future PerfectThey will have cooked the meal.The meal will have been cooked.Modal Verbs (can, must, should, etc.)They can cook the meal.The meal can be cooked. AspectActive VoicePassive VoiceDefinitionThe subject performs the action.The action is performed on the subject.FocusFocuses on the doer of the action.Focuses on the receiver of the action or the action itself.StructureSubject + Verb + ObjectSubject + Form of 'be' + Past Participle of Verb + (by + Agent)ExampleThe cat (subject) chased (verb) the mouse (object). The mouse (subject) was chased (verb) by the cat (agent). Clarity and DirectnessGenerally more direct and clear.Often less direct and can be vague if the agent is omitted.Common UsePreferred in most academic and professional writing for clarity.Common in scientific or formal contexts where focus is on action.EmphasisEmphasizes the action's performer.Emphasizes the action or the recipient of the action.Word CountTypically uses fewer words.Usually uses more words to convey the same meaning.Passivity/ActivityConveys a sense of activity and dynamism.Often conveys passivity, making it suitable for objective writing.SuitabilityIdeal for most types of writing, including storytelling and news.Preferred in technical reports and data-focused documents.Example SentencesThe researcher conducted the experiment."The experiment was conducted by the researcher." Understanding the passive voice can help improve your writing clarity and style. Here are the main rules and guidelines for using the passive voice: In passive voice, the object of an active sentence becomes the subject of the passive sentence. Active: "The cat chased the mouse." Passive: "The mouse was chased by the cat." Passive voice uses a form of the verb "to be" (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been) followed by the past participle of the main verb. Example: "The book was written by the author." Passive voice emphasizes the action or the recipient of the action rather than the doer. Example: "The cake was baked by her." The doer of the action (agent) can be omitted if it is unknown, unimportant, or obvious from the context. Example: "The window was broken." (agent omitted) Identify the object of the active sentence. Move the object to the subject position. Add the appropriate form of "to be." Use the past participle of the main verb. Optionally include the original subject preceded by "by." When using modal verbs (can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, would), the structure is: modal verb + be + past participle. Example: "The work can be finished by the team." Present Simple: "The letter is written." Past Simple: "The letter was written." Future Simple: "The letter will be written." Present Continuous: "The letter is being written." Past Continuous: "The letter had been written." Present Perfect: "The letter has been written." Past Perfect: "The letter had been written." Future Perfect: "The letter will have been written." Passive infinitives use "to be" + past participle. Example: "The report needs to be completed." Passive gerunds use "being" + past participle. Example: "She dislikes being interrupted." Use active voice when clarity and conciseness are needed. Passive: "The meeting was scheduled by the manager." Active: "The manager scheduled the meeting." Using the passive voice creatively in writing can enhance the style, tone, and clarity of your narrative, especially when you want to emphasize the action or the object of the action rather than the doer. Passive voice can be used to put the focus on the action or its results rather than on who performed the action. This is particularly useful in scientific writing, formal documentation, or when the doer is unknown or unimportant. Example: "The masterpiece was painted over several months." By omitting the doer, the passive voice can create a mysterious or suspenseful tone. This technique is often used in mystery and thriller genres to obscure identities and motives. Example: "The letters were delivered at midnight." In narratives where the experience of the subject is more important than who or what is acting upon it, the passive voice helps to emphasize the experience or suffering of the protagonist or object. Example: "The town was devastated by the hurricane." The passive voice can lend a formal or academic tone to your writing, which is often required in scholarly articles, legal documents, and formal reports. Example: "A review of the literature was conducted to formulate the guidelines." When you want to make statements impersonal and remove the subjectivity associated with the actor, the passive voice serves to neutralize and depersonalize the action. Example: "Mistakes were made during the project's execution." If you wish to shift the reader's focus from the doer to the process or the recipient, the passive voice can be effectively utilized. This is often seen in process descriptions or instructions. Example: "The cake must be baked at 350 degrees for twenty minutes." In political or sensitive contexts, the passive voice can be used to avoid assigning direct blame or responsibility, which can be a diplomatic approach to potentially contentious issues. Example: "Regrettably, the files were deleted." Passive constructions can give a sense of ongoing process or tradition, which is useful in historical or cultural discussions. Example: "Over the centuries, many legends have been told about this place." Mixing active and passive constructions can add stylistic variety to your writing, preventing monotony and maintaining the reader's interest. Example: "The experiment was set up carefully, and the scientists recorded the results meticulously." Use the passive voice in descriptive passages to enhance the setting or background, making it more vivid and integral to the scene. Example: "The forest floor was carpeted with a thick layer of pine needles." The passive voice often involves some form of the verb "to be" (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been) used as an auxiliary verb. Example: The book was read by her. Check if the main verb of the sentence is in its past participle form (typically ending in -ed, -en, -d, -t, -n, or -ne). Example: The window was broken by the ball. Look for a "by" phrase, which, if present, usually indicates that the sentence is passive. The "by" phrase names the doer or agent of the action. Example: The song was sung by the choir. See if the subject of the sentence is the recipient of the action rather than the doer. In passive voice, the subject is typically acted upon. Example: The letter was delivered yesterday. In passive sentences, what would be the object in an active sentence becomes the subject. Example: A new policy has been implemented by the management. Determine whether the focus of the sentence is on the action itself or the recipient of the action, rather than on who is performing the action. Example: Mistakes were made during the project. Passive constructions sometimes omit the agent completely, especially when the agent is unknown or irrelevant. Example: The window was broken. Consider if altering the sentence to include a typical action verb and a clear subject changes the clarity or meaning. This can help confirm if the passive voice is being used. Example: The mural was painted over the weekend. Passive voice can be more verbose and often includes prepositional phrases starting with "by" that are not essential to the sentence's core meaning. Example: The event will be attended by hundreds. A good test for passive voice is to try to reverse the sentence's structure to make it active. If you can place the "by" phrase subject as the main subject and the sentence still makes logical sense, it is likely passive. Example: Original: The trophy was won by the team. Reversed: The team won the trophy. Here are examples of passive voice sentences across various contexts: The house was cleaned by Mary. Dinner is being cooked by John. The cake was baked by her. The song is being sung by the choir. The car is being washed by him. The experiment was conducted by the researchers. The essay is being written by the student. The book was read by the entire class. The homework was completed by the students. The project is being reviewed by the teacher. The report was submitted by the employee. The meeting is being scheduled by the manager. The contract was signed by the client. The presentation was given by the team. The email is being sent by her. The software was developed by the engineers. The website is being designed by the developers. The bug was fixed by the technician. The data is being analyzed by the analysts. The system was updated by the IT department. The painting was created by the artist. The poem is being recited by the poet. The film was directed by the filmmaker. The novel was written by the author. The play is being performed by the actors. The work can be finished by the team. The project should be completed by next week. The task must be done by the end of the day. The document might be reviewed by the committee. The job will be done by the contractor. Present Simple: The letter is written by her. Past Simple: The letter was written by her. Future Simple: The letter will be written by her. Here are examples of passive voice sentences in a literary context: "The tale was told by an old man." "The castle was surrounded by a thick fog." "The mysterious letter was received by the protagonist." "The battle was fought with great courage by the knights." "The treasure was hidden a secret chamber." "The novel was written by a famous author." "The decision was made without any explanation." "The painting was admired by all who saw it." "The news was spread quickly through the town." "The secret was kept hidden for many years." "The poem was inspired by nature's beauty." "The song was sung by a chorus of angels." "The stars were watched by lovers in the night." "The story was passed down through generations." "The dreams were woven into tales of wonder." "The spell was cast by the ancient wizard." "The dragon was slain by the brave hero." "The prophecy was foretold by the oracle." "The kingdom was ruled by a benevolent queen." "The magical artifact was guarded by a fierce creature." "The crime was investigated by the detective." "The clues were found in the most unexpected places." "The victim was discovered in the early morning hours." "The plot was unraveled piece by piece." "The truth was revealed at the end of the story." Here are examples of passive voice sentences specifically in a business context: The report was submitted by the employee. The meeting is being scheduled by the manager. The contract was signed by the client. The presentation was given by the team. The email is being sent by her. The project was approved by the board. The budget is being reviewed by the finance department. The proposal was accepted by the committee. The training session is being conducted by the HR department. The new policy was implemented by the company. The website is being redesigned by the IT team. The invoice was paid by the customer. The marketing campaign is being launched by the agency. The feedback was received from the client. The product launch is being delayed by the supplier. The sales targets were met by the sales team. The complaint was handled by the customer service representative. The strategy is being developed by the consultants. The documents were signed by the CEO. The annual report is being prepared by the accounting department. Here are examples of passive voice sentences in various contexts of writing: "The experiment was conducted by the researchers." "The results were analyzed by the data scientists." "The theory was proposed by Dr. Smith." "The findings were published in a reputable journal." "The hypothesis was tested over several months." "The report was submitted by the employee." "The meeting is being scheduled by the manager." "The contract was signed by the client." "The presentation was given by the team." "The budget is being reviewed by the finance department." "The software was developed by the engineering team." "The bug was identified by the tester." "The device was designed by the top engineers." "The manual is being written by the technical writer." "The update was installed by the IT department." "The painting was created by the artist." "The poem is being recited by the poet." "The film was directed by the renowned filmmaker." "The novel was written by the famous author." "The play is being performed by the actors." "The contract was drafted by the attorney." "The case was reviewed by the judge." "The verdict was delivered by the jury." "The law was passed by the legislature." "The agreement is being negotiated by both parties." "The news was reported by the journalist." "The incident was captured on camera." "The event was attended by many celebrities." "The article was published in the morning edition." "The interview is being conducted by the reporter." "The cells were examined under a microscope." "The vaccine was developed by the research team." "The samples were collected from various locations." "The study was funded by the government." "The data is being processed by the computer." "The house was cleaned by Mary." "Dinner is being cooked by John." "The cake was baked by her." "The song is being sung by the choir." "The car is being washed by her." bu.edu georgebrown.ca gwc.ucr.edu files.eric.ed.gov lingref.com scu.edu dcu.ie scmemorial.org clas.ucdenver.edu gtfcc.kar.nic.in yvvc.edu A lot of professionals do not like seeing passive writing used in book writing as it will make one's writing less direct and subtle. This means that one must actively minimize one's proclivity in writing passive voice. Begin by learning or refreshing one's knowledge about voices in writing. This will help you innately know the concept of voices and will help improve your reflexes when using these voices in your writing. One of the best ways to minimize one's chances of reflexively writing in a passive voice is to practice intentionally writing in an active voice. This will build up one's ability to write in an active voice without it being intentional. Writing software helps one catch mistakes without needing to expend extra energy and thought into searching for mistakes. Examples of writing software include Grammarly and Prowritingaid. Not every clause can be converted into passive voice effectively or appropriately. Here's a clearer understanding of when a clause can be turned into passive voice and when it cannot: Transitive Verbs: Only clauses with transitive verbs (verbs that require a direct object) can be converted into passive voice. This is because passive constructions shift the focus from the subject (the doer) to the object (the receiver) of the action. Example: Active: "The chef prepared the meal." -> Passive: "The meal was prepared by the chef." Intransitive Verbs: Clauses that contain intransitive verbs (verbs that do not take a direct object) cannot be passivized. These verbs include actions like "sleep," "arrive," "go," and "sit." Example: Active: "He sleeps." -> Passive: Incorrect to convert Linking Verbs: Clauses with linking verbs (verbs that connect the subject to a subject complement, such as "be," "seem," "become") typically cannot be converted into passive voice. These verbs do not denote actions performed on an object but rather states of being. Example: Active: "She is a teacher." -> Passive: Incorrect to convert Clauses Without a Clear Agent: If a clause does not include a clear agent performing the action, converting it into passive voice can make it awkward or overly vague. Example: Active: "People speak English here." -> Passive: "English is spoken here." (The agent 'people' is somewhat vague and general.) Contextual Appropriateness: Even if a clause can be technically converted into passive voice, it may not always be appropriate due to stylistic, contextual, or clarity considerations. Clarity and Emphasis: In many cases, using the passive voice may obscure who is responsible for an action, which can be undesirable in legal, technical, or academic writing where clarity of agency is crucial. Stylistic Choices: The decision between using active or passive constructions often depends on what you want to emphasize in your sentence, the tone you wish to convey, and how formally you need to present your information. Misusing the passive voice can complicate your writing and obscure your meaning. Here are some simple points outlining common misuses of the passive voice: Overuse in Writing: Excessive use of the passive voice can make text seem wordy, evasive, or overly formal. Lack of Clarity: Passive sentences often lack clarity because they hide the subject performing the action, making it hard for readers to follow who is responsible for what. Impersonal Tone: Frequent use can create an impersonal tone, which might not engage readers as effectively as a more direct, active voice. Decreased Readability: Texts dominated by passive constructions are generally harder to read and understand compared to those with active sentences. Inappropriate Contexts: Using the passive voice in situations that traditionally benefit from a strong, decisive tone (e.g., leadership articles, calls to action) can dilute the message's impact. Redundancy and Verbosity: Passive sentences are typically more verbose than their active counterparts. This can lead to unnecessary redundancy in writing. Ambiguity About the Actor: When the doer of the action is omitted (often done in passive voice), it can lead to ambiguity, leaving readers guessing about responsibilities and roles. Inefficient Communication: Passive structures can impede the flow of information, making it less efficient, especially in procedural and instructional writing. Undermining Authority: Use in professional settings can unintentionally undermine the authority or expertise of the subject, as actions seem less assertive. Distortion of Intended Meaning: Misplacement of emphasis due to passive construction can distort the intended meaning, focusing on the wrong aspect of the sentence. The passive voice can be useful in various contexts for specific reasons. Here are some situations where using the passive voice is appropriate: When the action or its result is more important than the doer. Example: "The project was completed on time." (Focuses on the completion, not who completed it) When the doer of the action is unknown, irrelevant, or obvious from the context. Example: "The window was broken." (The doer is unknown or unimportant) In formal or scientific writing, to maintain an objective tone and focus on the research or findings. Example: "The experiment was conducted to test the hypothesis." To avoid specifying who is responsible for an action, especially in sensitive or negative situations. Example: "Mistakes were made during the process." To make statements sound more polite or less direct. Example: "Your request has been received and is being processed." When it's clear who the doer is from the context, so mentioning them is redundant. Example: "The meeting was scheduled for 10 AM." (By context, it is clear that the organizer did this) To create a specific tone, style, or emphasis in literary and creative writing. Example: "The story was told by an old man." To focus on the change of state or condition of the subject. Example: "The water was heated to boiling point." In news reporting to focus on the event or information rather than the subject. Example: "The law was passed by the legislature." To focus on the steps and procedures rather than the person performing them. Example: "The device should be turned off before cleaning." Using the passive voice involves rearranging the sentence to focus on the action or the recipient of the action rather than the doer. Here's a step-by-step guide on how to form and use the passive voice effectively: Find the object that receives the action in the active sentence. Active Example: "The chef cooks the meal." Place the object of the active sentence at the beginning of the passive sentence. Object Moved: "The meal" Use the correct form of the verb "to be" based on the tense of the original sentence. Tense Conversion: Present Simple: am/is/are Past Simple: was/were Future Simple: will be Present Continuous: am/is/are being Past Continuous: was/were being Present Perfect: has/have been Past Perfect: had been Future Perfect: will have been Example: "The meal is" (Present Simple) Combine the form of "to be" with the past participle of the main verb. Example: "The meal is cooked" Add "by" followed by the doer of the action if it is important to specify who performed the action. Example: "The meal is cooked by the chef." Passive voice occurs when the subject of the sentence receives the action. Example: "The book was read by her." Use passive voice to emphasize the action, when the doer is unknown or unimportant, or to create an objective tone. Form passive voice by using the appropriate form of "to be" + past participle of the main verb. Example: "The cake was baked." "The report was written by John." "The project is being reviewed." "The results have been published." Passive voice is used in scientific writing to maintain objectivity and focus on the action or results rather than the researcher. Look for a form of "to be" + past participle, and check if the subject is receiving the action. Example: The letter was sent by him." No, passive voice is not always bad. It is useful for emphasizing actions, creating an objective tone, and when the doer is unknown or irrelevant. Yes, passive voice can be used in various tenses: present, past, future, continuous, perfect. Example: "The letter is being written." Swap the object to the subject position, use the correct form of "to be," and add the past participle of the verb. Example: "She writes a letter" becomes "A letter is written by her." "The house is being cleaned by the maid." Add Tone Friendly Formal Casual Instructive Professional Empathetic Humorous Serious Optimistic Neutral 10 Examples of Public speaking 20 Examples of Gas lighting Reasons for using the active or passive voice In each of the following examples the first construction (passive) was the original wording in the source texts. The second construction (active) is provided for illustrative purposes and in each case the author's choice of the passive construction was sound for the reasons given in the explanations. It's a good idea to click on the links in order to see these sentences in their original context and see why the choice of the passive in each case contributed to coherence and clarity in the text. There are a number of reasons for choosing the passive voice: Elimination of Agent We wish to highlight what was the object in the active construction and eliminate the agent (or place it in a less prominent position in a by-phrase) "A more sustainable solution is required" is the last sentence in a paragraph outlining possible solutions to a particular problem (Bansah 2022). The emphasis is on the solution not on the agent so the passive voice with no by-phrase is a good choice. Where the agent is easily understood, irrelevant or unknown it can be omitted. This is common in academic writing. There are other reasons for omitting the agent. For example where blame might be assigned. "Mistakes were made" (but don't blame me!). We don't need the agent in this example; the short passive is the best choice Longer tend to be placed towards the end of a sentence. This is the principle of end-weight "Stars" is the title of the article (Jeeoon-Daniel 2013) which contains this example, and 'stars' are mentioned twice in the two brief paragraphs before this sentence, so we know what the subject is. By now this is not new information; it's given. So apart from the principle of end-weight (longer structures tend to be placed towards the end of a sentence) it also obeys the principle of end-focus (new information tends to be placed towards the end of a sentence). So the passive construction (long passive) is a good choice here. We tend to place given information towards the beginning of a sentence and new information towards the end. This principle influences our choice of active or passive. In this example (Fairchild 2019) "It" refers to light, mentioned in the previous two sentences. In fact the whole section concerns light and how it is controlled by the pupil. The word "brain" is mentioned here for the first and only time, so this is new information. The active version of this sentence could be used since the referent of the word "it" is still easily recoverable. However, the passive version follows the given/new convention and this is the best choice because placing pronouns like "it", "this", "these" at the beginning tells us immediately that the subject is not new information; it is something already mentioned and probably recoverable from the previous sentence. Some verbs, especially in academic writing, are more commonly used in the passive. These are verbs which concerned with logical relations, analysis, belief, and process. If, when you are writing an active sentence or converting a passive to an active, you are struggling to find a plausible agent and end up with "we" or "people" as in this example (Dallman 2022), it's a good sign that the passive construction is the best choice. In this example (Ritchie 2022) in the active "dingoes" becomes the direct object and "apex predators" is a complement. In this example (Skilling 2020) the vague "We" in the active version serves little purpose, which is why the passive version is better. In this example (Morro and Stromberga 2020) it is difficult to construct a plausible active version (what could the agent be?); in fact "be positioned" is almost always used in the passive voice. In this example (Whittaker 2021) "Engineers" is more specific than "people" but unless the agent needs to be mentioned the passive construction is better. In this example (Larson and Ogletree 2019) the by-phrase (prepositional phrase) is not the agent; it's an instrument adverbial. In this example (Barnett 2015) an agent is given in the passive construction - "some" (by some) meaning "some people". So we can use "Some" or "Some people" as the subject in the active construction. In this example (Alexander 2022) we have two verbs: "were regarded as" (prepositional verb) and "dismissed". Here there is an example of ellipsis: the auxiliary "were" is not repeated for "dismissed". In the active version we need to insert the pronoun "them" referring to "tomatoes" because dismissed is a transitive verb and needs an object. You may have been told to avoid using the passive for various reasons or you may have consulted a style guide which advises against its use. But there are sound reasons for using the passive as we have seen above. In academic writing it is essential, so you need to understand when to use it. One other criterion to consider is your audience. If you are writing for younger readers you might have reason to avoid complex structures, including the passive. In this example (Dorssen, Ball, and Rigby 2021) the writer was responding to an eight-year-old. The text is short and is written in a very personal style so the choice of active including a personal pronoun is an acceptable one. There are only two short passive constructions in the text; all the others are active. Passives are also used in a non-finite form. See examples of these on the non-finite passive constructions page. You can also test your understanding of passives on the passives exercise page. < Previous Next >