

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE: WHO'S BITING WHO?

La Salle University Writing Handouts



WHAT'S ACTIVE VOICE?

Active voice occurs when the subject of the sentence is doing the action and comes first in the sentence. When thinking about active voice, always ask, “Who’s biting who?” Here’s a straightforward example: The dog bit me. Here, the subject is the dog and the object is me. The dog comes first and is doing the action of the sentence: The dog (subject) bit me (object).

WHAT'S PASSIVE VOICE?

Passive voice is just the opposite. In passive voice, the target of the action gets promoted to the subject position. Instead of “The dog bit me,” I might write: I was bitten by the dog. Or: I have been bitten by the dog. In passive voice, the subject is the thing that had the action done to it, rather than the thing that did the action. This is why we think of it as passive—the subject receives action passively, rather than acting, well, actively.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

This matters for a few reasons:

- Passive voice can obscure who is acting and so sometimes the reader may not get full meaning. In the passive sentence “Amy is loved,” we don’t know who loves Amy.
- Studies have shown that passive voice is harder to understand, especially by those without a college education. If you are writing for a general population, you should avoid the passive voice simply for clarity’s sake.
- Using active voice can tighten your writing. Passive voice almost always requires more words than active, so avoiding it can help your writing be more to the point and less wordy. These are good things.
- Sometimes passive voice just reads or sounds weird. Consider the Marvin Gaye song “I heard it through the Grapevine.” The passive equivalent is “It was heard by me through the Grapevine.” Not such a catchy title.
- Sometimes passive voice creates sentences that a native English speaker would just never say. Consider the active sentence, “The bird flew through the air.” A passive equivalent could be “The air was flown in by the bird.” Oh dear...

ARE THERE REASONS TO EVER USE PASSIVE VOICE?

Definitely. Passive voice can be useful in certain situations for a variety of reasons:

- Passive voice can make feedback or other types of potentially scary communications less aggressive. “Your electricity will be shut off,” sounds much better than “We, the electric company, will be shutting off your power.” Similarly, a teacher might say “Failing to attend class regularly will have a negative impact on your course grade,” rather than “If you fail to attend class, I will reduce your course grade.”
- Sometimes people use passive voice to avoid taking responsibility. You will probably never hear a politician say “I made mistakes.” Instead they will say something like “Mistakes were made.” The second sentence focuses attention on the object, “mistakes” while not actually admitting that the politician made those mistakes.
- Sometimes you just don’t know who is acting. A news journalist might report “shots have been fired,” because they don’t know who fired the shots.
- Sometimes you want attention on what passively received action. Notice how these two sentences focus attention differently:
 - The knife cut me, and I was bleeding heavily.
 - I had been cut, and I was bleeding heavily.
- What is important in this very short story is not the knife, but the fact that I was cut and bleeding. I want attention on my experience so I would choose the second, passive sentence.
- Using passive voice can help you to make your syntax less repetitive. You don’t want all of your sentences to be structured exactly the same, so it’s ok to use it occasionally.

ACTIVITY

Label each of these sentences as active or passive and then try to change it to the other voice:

1.If you do not cease talking in the movie theater, you will be asked to leave.

2.As I backed out of the driveway, I hit a brick wall.

3.A thanksgiving meal is being provided for the homeless due to the students' efforts.

4.Their Eyes Were Watching God was written by Zora Neale Hurston during the era of the Harlem Renaissance.

