



Active and Passive Voice

You've probably been told many times to avoid passive voice and to use active voice instead. What is the difference?

In **active voice**, the subject of a sentence initiates a direct action on a direct object.

Example: The *mayor* **made** *decisions* that caused unnecessary suffering.
subject active object

In **passive voice**, the object of a sentence is treated like a subject, or initiator of an action. The main verb is preceded by a form of the verb “to be”—*was, is, are, were*. Note how even though *decision* now occupies the position of subject, it is still a “passive” recipient of the action—*were made by the mayor*.

Example: *Decisions* **were made** by the *mayor* that caused unnecessary suffering.
object passive subject



Use Active Voice in Most Cases

The rule of thumb in writing is to use active voice whenever possible. As you can see, using the passive voice results in a wordier sentence. Moving the object into the subject position usually forces the reader to backtrack in order to understand what the sentence is saying. Most readers will quickly lose patience trying to decipher passages written in passive voice, especially if they involve complicated procedures or technical details.

When is Passive Voice Appropriate?

To disguise the subject. The indirect action of passive voice allows you to de-emphasize the subject, which can be useful when writing about a potentially controversial or emotionally charged topic. The following passive construction hides the exact identity of the causative agent, who might in fact be harmed by being named.

Example: Decisions were made that caused unnecessary suffering.

Use this technique very sparingly. Particularly in the critical reviews and rhetorical analyses, failing to specify who made the mistakes will most likely be weaken your argument.

To focus attention on the object. Sometimes the result of an action may be more important than who caused it. Passive voice allows you to emphasize the object over the subject, or to omit the subject completely.

Example: Decisions were made and unnecessary suffering was the result. And people died.