



Active versus Passive Verbs

Whether to use active or passive voice depends upon your audience. Typically, speakers and writers of American English favor clear subjects and verbs in their sentences, so they tend to use active voice. Within academia, this convention holds true for humanities, fine arts, and education courses because readers want to know *who is doing what*. Most often, the *who* is the most important piece of information, so it falls near the beginning of the phrase.

In the natural and social sciences, however, objectivity and replication of results are key. The idea is that anyone following the outlined procedures should be able to replicate the described experiment and achieve the same results. Therefore, *what was done* and *what happened* is far more important than *who* was doing it. In the interest of objectivity, the *who* is de-emphasized or left out all together. These writers favor passive voice.

Active: *Who is doing what* -or- The *subject* (noun) is *acting* (verb).

Examples: Last November, *I* subject (who acts) *ran* verb (did what) for President of the United States.
My opponent subject (who acts) *placed* verb (did what) television ads featuring me in a tutu.
Television viewers subject (who acts), who were not amused by the ads, *voted* verb (did what) for my opponent.
Therefore, *I* subject (who acts) *lost* verb (did what) and cannot declare ice cream the official food of America.

Another example: Judy subject (who acts) *kicked* verb (did what) the ball.

Passive: What is *being done to whom* -or- The *action* (verb) is being done to an *object* (noun) receiving the action. (The subject is still the one doing the action, but the subject is now harder to locate within the sentence.)

Examples: Last November, *I* object (action was done to) *was nominated* verb (what was done) by *party officials* subject (who acted) to run for President.
Television ads object (action was done to) featuring me in a tutu *were placed* verb (what was done) by *my opponent* subject (who acted).
I object (action was done to) *was not voted for* verb (what was done) by *television viewers* subject (who acts), who were not amused by the ads.
Therefore, *I* object (action was done to) *was not chosen* verb (what was done) by *voters* subject (who acted) and cannot declare ice cream the official food of America.

Another example: The ball was *kicked* verb (did what) by Judy subject (who acts).

Clues to look for:

- (1) Passive sentences frequently begin with “It is . . .” “There is . . .” “There are . . .”

Example: *There is* one reason I was not chosen for President: television ads featuring me in a tutu.

- (2) Passive sentences usually contain a form of the verb *to be* (i.e. *am, is, was, were, are, been*) in front of the acting verb in the sentence.

Example: Television ads featuring me in a tutu *were placed* by my opponent.

- (3) Passive sentences may be wordy. Read over what you’ve written and see if some of your phrases could be more concise.

Example: Television ads were placed by my opponent’s supporters that featured me in a tutu.

More concise: My opponent’s supporters placed television ads featuring me in a tutu.

- (4) Active phrases are direct; you know for sure who is doing what. Passive phrases are indirect; the subject of the sentence is harder to identify. Check to see if the person or thing doing the action is at the beginning of the phrase; if it is, chances are the phrase is in active voice.

Examples: The election was held by officials on a Tuesday. (passive)

Officials held the election on a Tuesday. (active)

- (5) Passive sentences often include the word “by.”

Examples: The picnic was spread out by the fathers of the soccer players.

(passive) The fathers of the soccer players spread out the picnic. (active)