

Passive Voice Q & A

What is passive voice?

Passive voice means the subject of the sentence is *receiving* the action rather than *doing* the action. To get technical, the direct object becomes the subject of the sentence. For example:

The paper was written by Bob.

This sentence is passive because the *paper* isn't doing anything even though it's the grammatical subject of the sentence. If you type that sentence into Word, it will be underlined because the program recognizes it as passive.

Why is passive voice "wrong"?

While legal and scientific disciplines often require passive voice, overuse robs writing of energy and flow. Also, passive voice can lead to dangling modifiers—that is, the passive voice itself might not be "wrong," but may make it easier to commit other types of errors.

How do I recognize passive voice?

Sentences with passive voice don't just contain one verb; there will *always* be a form of the verb *be* + a past participle (*-en* or *-ed*) verb. For example, *was* + *written* in the sentence above.

Many times, the word *by* is a clue. It isn't always there, for example:

The paper was written.

This sentence is still passive even though the sentence doesn't tell us *by whom* the paper was written.

How do I change passive voice to active voice?

To make a passive sentence active, follow these steps:

1. Ask yourself *who* is doing the action.
2. Make that the subject of the sentence.
3. Take out the form of *be* and change the main verb to past tense (*-ed*).
4. Say *what* the subject did (direct object).

In the example above, Bob wrote the paper, so we make him the subject. Then we take out *was*, change *written* to *wrote*, and say *what* he wrote:

Bob wrote the paper.

Is it ever okay to use passive voice?

Sure, but you have to know *why* you're using it. You might choose to use passive voice if the *doer* is unknown or unimportant. For example, writing "A study was conducted" is okay if it doesn't matter *who* conducted it. If the *doer* is important or relevant, however, it's better to make that *doer* the subject and say "The FBI conducted a study" rather than "A study was conducted by the FBI."