

Active Voice vs. Passive Voice

Active voice occurs when the subject of a sentence is acting. The subject can be thought of as the active actor of the sentence. This is accomplished by using verbs that express action emphatically and vigorously. Carefully selected verbs can bring energy to a piece of writing. The active voice is most interesting to the reader and is often preferred by instructors.

Examples: Hurricane Katrina **destroyed** many homes and businesses.
subject *active verb*

JCCC students **painted** the mural on the college campus.
subject *active verb*

Passive voice occurs when the subject of a sentence is being acted upon. This is accomplished by using a form of the *be* verb (*be, am, is, was, were, being, been*) with the past participle of the main verb. When a subject receives the action instead of doing it, the subject lacks strength. The passive voice does have its place, for example in scientific writing.

Examples: Many homes and businesses **were destroyed** by Hurricane Katrina.
subject *be verb + past participle*

The mural on the college campus **was painted** by JCCC students .
subject *be verb + past participle*

While in the process of writing a first draft, using passive voice without realizing it is very common. The writer may initially be more focused on getting the content down on paper and less concerned about sentence style. With revision, the writer can **change sentences from the passive voice to the active voice**.

Examples: The bone **was devoured** by the hungry dog. (**passive**)
subject *be verb + past participle*

The hungry dog **devoured** the bone. (**active**)
subject *active verb*

The Battle of Waterloo **was lost** by Napoleon. (**passive**)
subject be verb + past participle

Napoleon **lost** the Battle of Waterloo. (**active**)
subject active verb

Bad social environments **are caused** by the violence in nature. (**passive**)
subject be verb + past participle

Violence in nature **causes** bad social environments. (**active**)
subject active verb

Betty **was followed** by us up and down the subway stairs of New York. (**passive**)
subject be verb + past participle

We **followed** Betty up and down the subway stairs of New York. (**active**)
subject active verb

When the writer intentionally wishes to emphasize the receiver of the action OR minimize the importance of the actor, **the passive is appropriate**.

Examples: Many Aborigines of Australia **have been forced** off their lands by colonizing
subject have + be verb + past participle
conquerors.

- Here the writer wishes to emphasize the receiver (*Many Aborigines of Australia*) of the action (*have been forced*).

Early in the growing season, the crop **is sprayed** with a pesticide to resist damaging
subject be verb + past participle
insects.

- Here the writer wishes to emphasize the crop being sprayed with a pesticide, not those doing the spraying (a possible subject for this sentence).

These are the basic suggestions for active & passive voice; for more complex concepts, please see Writing Center staff or several handbooks available in the JCCC Writing Center.

For exercises to practice your active voice vs. passive voice skills, please see Writing Center staff.