



Figure 1 The Writing Center and Academic Resource Center logos

## ACTIVE VS. PASSIVE VOICE

*Active* and *passive* voices refer to the relationship between the *subject* and the *verb*. In an *active* sentence, the subject is doing something. In a *passive* sentence, the subject does nothing; it is acted upon.

Although there are occasions when the passive voice is appropriate, it can also sound dull and wordy. The passive voice has its specific uses in writing, but most of your writing will not need the passive voice because the active voice makes your writing stronger and livelier.

To switch from *passive* to *active* voice is really very simple. Instead of having something *happen to* the subject, you make the subject *do* something.

The pizza was eaten by the girls. (passive)  
The girls ate the pizza. (active)

Sometimes, you may be tempted to use the passive voice to avoid a *first person* point of view. The result can be stilted and awkward.

The house was cleaned, the fish were fed, and then the expensive vase was broken.  
(passive)  
I cleaned the house, I fed the fish, and then I broke the expensive vase.

In other words, ask yourself, “who kicked whom?”

If you find you are using the passive voice in your writing, here are three steps to help you turn a passive sentence into an active one:

1. The original object becomes the subject (the star of the sentence).

2. The *to be* form + *-en* or *-ed* ending is removed from the active verb (was + eaten, was played).
3. The original subject becomes the direct object (the person or thing on which the subject acts).

This is much easier than it sounds. Let's turn a passive sentence into an active sentence.

*Passive:* The cookie was given to John.

In this sentence, *cookie* is the subject, *was given* is the *verb*, and *John* is the *indirect object*. To make this sentence *active*, we need to turn the *object*, John, into the *subject*.

John ate the cookie. (*Active*)

*The cookie* is a direct object because it is the thing being acted upon by the subject, *John*. He is eating the *cookie*.

There are certain times when it is appropriate to use the *passive voice*. The first is when you do not *need* to know who did something, or when we *don't know* who did it.

My car was stolen yesterday. (passive) Someone stole my car yesterday. (active)
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You can also use the *Passive voice* in incidents of tragedy, accident or violence.

She was kidnapped. (passive) Someone kidnapped her. (active)
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### **Exercise:**

**Change the following sentences to the active voice.**

1. A candidate will be elected as mayor by the public next year.
2. A batch of cookies was made by my son this morning.
3. The subway fare will be raised to \$1.50 next week by the city.

4. The play has been called witty and warm by well-known and knowledgeable critics.
5. The pumpkin was tossed off the bridge by that group of trick-or-treaters.
6. My book was dropped off at the library.
7. An example of a passive sentence was demanded by the professor.
8. The guitar was played by the musician.

**This handout is based on the following texts:**

Harper, Vincent F. Essentials of English. Fourth Ed. Barron's, USA. 1990.

Kolln, Martha. Understanding English Grammar. Second Ed. MacMillan Publishing Company, New York. 1986.

**For further reference, see the following books:**

Beason, Larry and Mark Lester. A Commonsense Guide to Grammar and Usage. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Boston: Bedford.

Holschuh, Louis W. The Functions of English Grammar. New York: St. Martin's.

**All of the above texts are available in The Writing Center.**

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