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Active vs. Passive Voice

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Verbs are either active or passive in voice. In the active voice, the subject and verb relationship is straightforward: the subject is a do-er. In the passive voice, the subject of the sentence is not a do-er. It is shown with by + do-er or is not shown in the sentence.

Passive voice is used when the action is the focus, not the subject. It is not important (or not known) who does the action

Examples:

- The window is broken. (It is not known who broke the window, or it is not important to know who broke the window.)
- The class has been canceled. (The focus is on the class being canceled. It is not important to know who canceled it.)
- The passive voice is often used. (The focus is on the passive voice. It is not important to explain who the writer is.)

Passive voice should be avoided when you want more clarity in writing. However, in some cases, you need to use passive voice to stress the action, not the actor. Also, passive voice can be considered more polite, as it sounds less aggressive or dramatic.

Examples

- That building was built in 1990.
- The car was invented about a hundred years ago.
- I was told that Mary moved to a different country.
- Your business is appreciated.
- She was elected to city council.
- It was rumored that the company would lay off a few people soon.
- It is recommended that the billing process be shortened.

You can easily rewrite an active sentence to a passive sentence. The object in the active sentence becomes a subject in the passive sentence. The verb is changed to a “be” verb + past participle. The subject of the active sentence follows by or is omitted.

Examples:

- Sam wrote a letter to Jamie.
- A letter was written to Jamie by Sam.

- The government built a new bridge.
- A new bridge was built by the government.

- I recommend that you apply for this position.
- It is recommended that you apply for this position.

In grammar, the voice of a verb describes the relationship between the action (or state) that the verb expresses and the participants identified by its arguments (subject, object, etc.).

the subject is the agent or doer of the action, the verb is in the active voice. When the subject is the patient, target or undergoer of the action, the verb is said to be in the passive voice.

When the subject both performs and receives the action expressed by the verb, the verb is in the middle voice.

The following pair of examples illustrates the contrast between active and passive voice in English.

In sentence (1), the verb form *ate* is in the active voice, but in sentence (2), the verb form *was eaten* is in the passive voice.

Independent of voice, *the cat* is the Agent (the doer) of the action of eating in both sentences.

1. *The cat ate the mouse.*

2. *The mouse was eaten by the cat.*

In a transformation from an active-voice clause to an equivalent passive-voice construction, the subject and the direct object switch grammatical roles.

A passive voice construction is a grammatical voice construction that is found in many languages.

A Clause with passive voice, the grammatical subject expresses the *theme* or *patient* of the main verb – that is, the person or thing that undergoes the action or has its state changed.

This contrasts with active voice, in which the subject has the agent role. For example, in the passive sentence "The tree was pulled down", the subject (*the tree*) denotes the patient rather than the agent of the action. In contrast, the sentences "Someone pulled down the tree" and "The tree is down" are active sentences.

Typically, in passive clauses, what is usually expressed by the object (or sometimes another argument) of the verb is now expressed by the subject, while what is usually expressed by the subject is either omitted or is indicated by some adjunct of the clause. Thus, turning an active sense of a verb into a passive sense is a valence-decreasing process ("detransitivizing process"), because it syntactically turns a transitive sense into an intransitive sense.

Quiz

Rewrite the following sentence in passive voice.

John gave me a bunch of flowers on my birthday.

Quiz

Choose the sentences written incorrectly in the passive voice.

- 1) I was eaten an ice cream.
- 2) The song was sung by a singer.
- 3) I was deceived by the TV program.
- 4) The concert was finished at 12 p.m.
- 5) He was written a novel.
- 6) The tennis match was aired on TV.
- 7) He was treated kindly.