

Active and Passive Voice

Voice refers to the form of a verb that indicates when a grammatical subject performs the action or is the receiver of the action. When a sentence is written in the active voice, the subject performs the action; in the passive voice, the subject receives the action. In academic writing, it is generally preferred to choose an active verb and pair it with a subject that names the person or thing doing or performing the action. Active verbs are stronger and usually more emphatic than forms of the verb “be” or verbs in the passive voice.

Active: The award-winning chef prepares each meal with loving care.

Passive: Each meal is prepared with loving care by the award-winning chef.

In the above example of an active sentence, the simple subject is “chef” and “prepares” is the verb: the chef prepares “each meal with loving care.” In the passive sentence, “meal” is the simple subject and “is prepared” is the verb: each meal is prepared “by the award-winning chef.”

In effect, the object of the active sentence becomes the subject in the passive sentence. Although both sentences have the same basic components, their structure makes them different from each other. Active sentences are about what people (or things) do, while passive sentences are about what happens to people (or things).

USING THE AUXILIARY VERB “BE”

The passive voice is formed by using a form of the auxiliary verb “be” (be, am, is, are, was, were, being, been) followed by the past participle of the main verb.

Active

He **loves** me.

We **took** our children to the circus.

A thief **stole** my money.

Passive

I **am loved**.

The children **were taken** to the circus.

My money **was stolen**.

Notice how the “be” auxiliaries change the meaning of the verbs from action to condition or from “doing” to “being.”

He **remembers** his grandmother. (“he” is doing an action: remembering)

His grandmother **is remembered**. (“she” is in a condition: being remembered)

In this way, the past participle functions very much like an adjective; it describes the subject.

The woman is pretty. She is a pretty woman

The woman is married. She is a married woman.