Voice is the form of a verb that shows whether the subject of the sentence performs or receives the action.

In active voice, the subject performs the action. In passive voice, the subject receives the action.

**Examples of Sentences in the Active and Passive Voices**

**Active voice:** The cat ate a bowl of sardines.

**Passive voice:** A bowl of sardines was eaten by the cat.

**Active voice:** The divers discovered an eerie, glowing underwater cave.

**Passive voice:** An eerie, glowing underwater cave was discovered by the divers.

**Active voice:** This supermarket sells evening gowns.

**Passive voice:** Evening gowns are sold by this supermarket.

**Advantages of Using the Active Voice**

Sentences written in the active voice tend to be crisper and less wordy than those in the passive voice.\(^1\)

**When the Passive Voice May Be More Effective**

If you don’t know who performed an action, if you need to avoid assigning blame, or if you do not want to emphasize who performed an action, it may be better to use the passive voice.\(^2\) In passive sentences, the actor frequently disappears.\(^3\)

“Scientific writing often uses the passive voice to emphasize the experiment or the process: The solution was heated to the boiling point and then reduced in volume by 50 percent.”\(^4\)

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2 Ibid., 96.
4 Ibid., 4.
Active and passive voice - script

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Examples: The Actor Is Unknown or You Wish to Avoid Assigning Blame

The dung bomb was detonated just as Professor Snape came slinking down the hall.

For unknown reasons, the house was egged.

A bad decision was made, and the house collapsed.

The budget was poorly planned.

The food was not seasoned at all.

The package was damaged en route.

The reports were not only submitted a week late, but they were written in crayon.

Examples: Emphasis on the Recipient of the Action Is Desired

Prudence was shunned by the debutantes because she wore striped witch socks. (Prudence is emphasized, not the debutantes.)

The mice were dipped in egg batter before they managed to escape the iron claws of Detective Mittens. (The mice are emphasized, not Detective Mittens.)

The complete lack of attendance that day was caused by an omission in the schedule. (The lack of attendance is emphasized rather than the omission.)

Examples: Scientific Writing

After the baking soda was added to the vinegar, a chemical reaction occurred.

The solution was allowed to freeze before it was weighed.

The leaves were pressed under a heavy book and then examined under a microscope.
Practice Worksheet for Active and Passive Voice

Please read the sentences below and make stylistic changes, if necessary, to create more effective sentences that are appropriate to the situations described. There may be more than one way to write these sentences correctly. The point of the exercise is for you to think about the impact of using active versus passive voice in each situation.

(Situation: A notice is sent to colleagues concerning an unlocked office door and a theft.)

1. Someone did not lock the office door, and someone stole the portrait of Headmaster Derriere.

(Situation: This is a sentence in an English paper about American author Paul Bowles.)

2. It is written by Bowles’s biographer that he did not like living in New York City, but preferred Tangier.

(Situation: A school principal sends out a notice to parents about a mischievous prank played in the school halls.)

3. I regret to inform you that a student drew a moustache on the statue of Colonel Ledyard’s wife. When I discover the individual responsible, I will punish him by having him muck out the Avery Hill Stables every weekend for the rest of the year.
Active and passive voice - script

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(Situation: A child writes a science report stating the amount of time it took for a bowling ball to hit the ground when dropped from an attic window)

4. The bowling ball was dropped from an attic window that is thirty feet above the ground, and it landed in exactly one second.

________________________________________________________________________

(Situation: This is a sentence in a school paper.)

5. The last play ever written by Shakespeare, The Tempest, is a comedy.

________________________________________________________________________

The sentence pairs below are written in both the active and the passive voice. Please place a check mark in front of the version you prefer. Which sentence is more concise, crisp, and clear? In some cases, you may find that you like (or dislike) both versions equally.

___ My parents still remember the day when the American forces arrived in their village to liberate the Italians from Hitler’s ravaging armies.
___ The day when the American forces arrived in their village to liberate the Italians from Hitler’s ravaging armies is still remembered by my parents.

___ The award will be given to the most deserving student in the 8th-grade class.
___ The most deserving student in the 8th-grade class will receive the award.

___ People now consider the term “witch doctor” to be offensive and inappropriate.
___ The term “witch doctor” is now considered to be offensive and inappropriate.

___ Do not disturb a sleeping dragon, or you may become its dinner.
___ The disturbance of a sleeping dragon may cause you to become its dinner.

___ Given the prevalence of Santa imposters this time of the year, the tugging of all white beards encountered is recommended by the Post Office.
___ Given that Santa imposters are prevalent this time of the year, the Post Office recommends that you tug at any white beard you may encounter.