

Active voice cheat sheet

Prefer the active voice over the passive. The active voice doesn't sound as formal as the passive, and it's usually more concise. The passive voice can also be ambiguous.

Recognising active and passive voice

You can identify the verb voice from the structure of the sentence, or if you're more familiar with grammar, by the use of certain verb forms. We've explained both ways below.

Sentence structure

To check the voice of your verbs:

- Find the verb (action, doing word) in your sentence. There may be more than one, so you'll need to check the others too
- Note the position of the agent (a person, group or thing) doing the verb. In formal grammar, the agent is known as the 'subject', but I find this often confuses people. So we'll stick with agent.

Active voice structure

In the active voice, the agent appears before the verb: **agent > verb**

Example: 'The committee approved the program' (or 'The committee approved'). Here, the verb is 'approved' and the agent is 'the committee'.

Passive voice structure

In the passive voice, the agent appears after the verb: **verb > agent**

Example: 'The program was approved by the committee' (or 'The program was approved').

In this example, the agent isn't mentioned. But if you can add the phrase 'by the agent' after the verb, the voice is passive.

Verb form

The passive voice uses an auxiliary (helper) verb with a past participle. Note that:

- auxiliary verbs are usually a form of the verb 'to be' (am, are, is, was, were, been, being)
- past participles are verbs that end in 'ed' or 'en', although irregular verbs have no pattern to help recognise the past participle

Note that the tense (past, present, future) of the auxiliary verb is not relevant.

Example: 'The program was approved by the committee' (or 'The program was approved').

In this example, 'was' is the auxiliary verb, and 'approved' is the past participle.

Knowing when the passive voice is OK

There are three main reasons for choosing the passive over the active voice.

To emphasise the object of an action

'100 votes are required to pass the bill.' The passive voice emphasises the number of votes.

'The bill requires 100 votes to pass'. The active voice emphasises the bill.

To de-emphasise an unknown or unimportant agent

'Over 100 contaminants have been dumped into the river.' Passive voice is appropriate because we don't know who has done this.

When the agent is obvious or your readers really don't need to know who it is

'The press release was sent at 6pm yesterday.' Passive voice is fine because either it's obvious that the communications team sent it or, or our readers don't need to know.

Using grammar checkers

If you struggle to identify the voice of a verb, try using a grammar checker like the one built into Microsoft Word. If you enable it (by going to the File > Options > Proofing menu) it will highlight passive voice as you write.

Hemingway Editor is a free online tool that will highlight your passive sentences. See

<http://www.hemingwayapp.com/>

Examples

Here are some examples of passive voice changed to active voice. See if you can use one of the methods above to identify the active and passive voices.

Passive voice	Active voice
The process has been changed by the board.	The board changed the process.
There will be a discussion of the report by the project team.	The project team will discuss the report (or 'Management will discuss the project team's report').
It was considered by the committee.	The committee considered it.
Scholarship funding will be managed by the university.	The university will manage scholarship funding.
A complaint was lodged by her supervisor.	Her supervisor lodged a complaint.
Our conclusion is supported by the evidence.	The evidence supports our conclusion.
Coastal towns are being threatened by global warming.	Global warming is threatening coastal towns.
Three mistakes were admitted by the accountant.	The accountant admitted three mistakes.
The book has been read by most of the class. The book was read by most of the class.	Most of the class has read the book. Most of the class read the book.
The new procedures have been ignored by our employees.	Our employees have ignored the new procedures.
Errors were found in our audit.	The tax office found errors in our audit.
Your performance must be reviewed by your manager.	Your manager must review your performance.
It was concluded that the treatment was effective.	Researchers concluded that the treatment was effective (or 'Patients found the treatment was effective').

Contractors and consultants are kept informed of the status of the department's works and services.	We keep contractors informed of the status of the department's works and services
The town was heavily damaged in the Ash Wednesday bushfires.	The Ash Wednesday bushfires heavily damaged the town (or 'The Ash Wednesday bushfires caused heavy damage in the town').
A number of problems are indicated by these results.	These results indicate a number of problems.
The proposal to increase the use of renewable energy sources was rejected by the Minister.	The Minister rejected the proposal to increase the use of renewable energy sources.
A varied range of programs for the elderly are provided by the local council.	The local council provides a varied range of programs for the elderly.
Genetic information is encoded by DNA.	DNA encodes genetic information.
parts of rural India are plagued by highway robbers.	Highway robbers plague parts of rural India.
The application for the job was faxed by her yesterday.	She faxed the application for the job yesterday.