

The term voice, when used in English grammar, refers to the structure of a sentence. There are two “voices” in English grammar, active voice and passive voice.

Active Voice: In an **active voice** sentence, the **agent** (the one who does the action in the sentence) is stated explicitly as the grammatical subject. The thing that the agent does something to (the direct object) comes after the verb. Here’s an example.

Active Voice Sentence: Julio cooked fried rice.

“Julio” is the **agent**. He’s the one who does the action. In this case, he’s the one who cooked the rice. In this active voice sentence, Julio is the **grammatical subject**. What did Julio cook? He cooked fried rice. The words fried rice make up the **direct object**. The fried rice is the thing that the agent (Julio) does something to. In this case he cooked it.

Passive Voice: In a **passive voice** sentence, the thing that the agent does something to, is placed as the grammatical subject of the sentence. The agent (the one who does the action) is placed after the subject, usually in a prepositional phrase. In fact, sometimes the agent is hidden, not even mentioned.

Passive Voice Sentence: The fried rice was cooked by Julio. (The agent is mentioned.)

Passive Voice Sentence: The fried rice was cooked. (The agent is not mentioned.)

In Academic Writing, Use the Active Voice. Use the active voice in most of the writing you do in school and at work. Studies in readability indicate that active voice sentences, where the agent is stated first, are easier to understand than passive voice sentences.

So When Should You Use the Passive Voice?

1. When the receiver of the action is more important than the agent.

Active Voice: The Nobel Foundation awarded President Obama the Nobel Peace Prize.

Passive Voice: President Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The passive voice construction places the emphasis on the receiver of the Nobel Peace Prize, not on the organization that awarded the prize.

2. When you consciously try to minimize the role of the agent or the agent is not known.

Active Voice: Marie Jenkins could not complete the status report because James McDonald misplaced the manufacturing data.

Passive Voice: The status report was not completed because manufacturing data were misplaced.

3. When you write about scientific, technical, or natural processes.

Active Voice: The conveyor belt delivers the shrink-wrapped product to the packing station.

Passive Voice: The shrink-wrapped product is delivered to the packing station.

Using active voice or passive voice is a stylistic and rhetorical choice about sentence structure. It’s important to understand the structure so that you control the structure instead of letting the structure control you. But remember; use the **active voice** in most of your academic and work-related writing.

Exercises: Convert each sentence from active to passive or from passive to active. Justify your decision.

1. When the Phillies's Shane Victorino overran him, third base was stolen by Johnny Damon.

2. A happy Thanksgiving is wished by me for everyone.

3. The attorney general indicted the notorious gangster, Al Capone, for federal income tax evasion.

4. The student services committee forwarded revised disciplinary procedures to the campus president.

5. Six Thousand shares of Disney stock were bought by Jenny Allen when she was only nineteen.

6. People can view the dazzling meteor shower from the observation tower at the planetarium.

7. The acceptance letter from Harvard was received by Jenny Arteaga last Tuesday.

8. An invitation to Francis Suarez's victory party was received by Mr. Packer, the state party chairman.

9. The Baseball Writers Association of America named Joe Mauer, the Minnesota Twins' catcher who led the American League with a .365 batting average, MVP for 2009.
