

THE PASSIVE VOICE

Sometimes, students erroneously believe that the passive voice will make their writing sound more sophisticated or academic. In most cases, however, the passive voice veils meaning and confuses the reader.

Definition

In the active voice, which is the normal structure of a sentence in English, the **subject** does the **verb** to the **direct object**. In the example, *I kicked the ball*, *I* is the subject and *ball* is the direct object. The passive voice **turns the direct object into the subject**. In the passive voice, the above example changes to *The ball was kicked by me*. The writer can now express the old subject only in a **prepositional phrase** beginning with *by*. Since prepositional phrases are only modifiers, they are easy to drop from a sentence: *The ball was kicked*. Thus, the subject of an active-voice sentence becomes obscured and grammatically unimportant in a passive-voice sentence.

Writers can easily recognize passive voice constructions because they contain a characteristic verb phrase:

form of the verb to be + past participle

For example: Your assignment *was lost*.
The papers *will be graded*.
The actor *is known*.

Usage

Of course, the passive voice has advantages. There are times when it is the obvious choice in writing a sentence. Use the passive voice when...

- You are giving directions to an unknown subject
The nut is then screwed onto the bolt.
- You do not know who performs the action of the sentence
Secret information was leaked to the press.
- The performer of the action is irrelevant to the point you are making
Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in a theater, not at a political event.

Good writers DO NOT use the passive voice to...

- Lengthen a sentence
The site of the excavation was examined by the project manager so that assessment of the damages incurred might be made.
- Make writing sound more sophisticated or academic
By the use of the word "improvement" is implied a specific eighteenth century cultural and conceptual paradigm.
- Deny responsibility
My homework is not done.