# Understanding Active Voice vs. Passive Voice

**By the end of this lesson you should be able to:**

* Identify the difference between active and passive voice.
* Learn how to focus on either the subject or the object using voice.
* Write more clearly and concisely for the person reading your essays.

**Introduction**

There are two ways in which to write sentences: using either active or passive voice.

* **Active voice** gives your writing more pace and energy. You focus on the subject of the sentence and its/their action. This means that somebody or something is clearly doing something and the reader can easily picture what is happening.
* By contrast, the **passive voice** focuses on the object of the sentence. This means that the person or thing who had the action done to them is the first part of the sentence while the subject and the action move to the end of the sentence. It’s acceptable to have a passive sentence now and again, but too many of these will make your writing dull and lifeless. Moreover, passive sentences often end up being overly wordy and complex. You are more likely to confuse yourself and mess up the grammatical structure of a long sentence when it is in the passive voice.

It is preferable that students use active voice in academic writing. This is because it is easier and clearer for markers to read. There is, however, a place for passive voice. Passive voice places emphasis on the object of your sentence. If the aim of your sentence is to highlight your object, then use passive voice! We now turn in greater detail to each of these:

1. **Active Voice**:

*The subject does the action.*

Example 1: *Philiswa drives the car.*

In the above sentence, the subject (Philiswa) performs the action of driving. The car is the object of the sentence: it is the thing that Philiswa drives.

Example 2: *Rhodes owned De Beers Diamonds.*

In the above sentence, Rhodes performs the action of owning De Beers Diamonds.

Rhodes is the subject; De Beers Diamonds is the object.

1. **Passive Voice**:

*The subject has the action done to him/her/it.*

Example 1: The car is driven by Philiswa.

In this sentence, the car is the subject. The car has something done to it (it is driven) by somebody else (Philiswa, who is the object of the sentence).

Example 2: De Beers Diamonds was owned by Rhodes.

In this sentence, De Beers Diamonds is the subject; Rhodes is the object.

**When it is a good idea to use the passive voice?**

Passive sentences tend to take the emphasis off the person who is doing the action. As writers we might want to do this deliberately, for example when we do not know who performed the action, or it is not important to the point we are making. Passive voice can therefore be used quite wisely and appropriately – it’s not always a bad thing.

Example 1: *My car was stolen last night.* (We don’t know who stole the car.)

Example 2: *She has been awarded numerous degrees with distinction.* (It doesn’t really matter where she studied – the point is the degrees she got.)

Example 3: *Anybody caught taking electricity through illegal connections will be arrested.* (We know who does the arresting: the police. There is no need to state the obvious.)

Example 4: *The accident victim was declared dead on arrival at the hospital.* (Again, we can reasonably assume that it was medical personnel who made the declaration; we don’t need to be told that.)

Sometimes the writer/speaker does not want the reader/listener to think too hard about who did the action. Ronald Reagan once said, “Mistakes were made” – a notorious attempt to avoid taking responsibility for a high-profile policy blunder. The active voice of this statement reads: “I made mistakes.”

**EXERCISES**

**Activity 1**

Can you think of any sentences that you write in passive voice?

Try to identify these in your essay/assignment and write them in active voice:

**Activity 2**

**Change the following sentences into the active voice.**

Example: The carpet was chewed by the dog. Answer: The dog chewed the carpet.

1. Gandhi’s notion of Satyagraha was taught by Professor Smith.

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2. The electoral process was funded by citizens paying money to the electoral parties.

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3. Greater women’s representation in legislative bodies was enabled by the closed-list PR system.

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4. The Dalai Lama was not hosted by South Africa.

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5. The students were confused by the different electoral systems.

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6. It was a belief of Marx’s that the elite would eventually disappear.

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NB: Notice how to turn a passive sentence into an active one, if the original sentence has no object (i.e. if the person / party doing the action is IMPLIED, not stated.) you need to understand the context in which the sentence is written.

Example: Passive voice: This politics assignment must be submitted by the due date.

Active voice: You must submit this politics assignment by the due date.

Notice in the above example that there is no subject in the sentence written in the passive voice. However, we assume the context of the sentence refers to a student who needs to hand in the assignment on the due date; therefore, we can label the subject as “you”.

**Activity 3**

**Write sentences in the active voice for the following. Assume what the subject is based on the information in the sentence:**

[In a Parliamentary debate on the national budget:] The budget for education must be increased by at least 15% next year.

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A salary raise of 6.5% will be given to all university tutors this year.

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Threats to the freedom of the press must be challenged!

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