# Passive Voice & Passive Agency

English verbs have two voices—active and passive. The choice between these voices will most likely depend on audience expectations, genre, and discipline. A humanities audience, for example, will typically prefer active voice, finding it to be more direct, economical, and clear than the alternative. For science writing, however, passive voice tends to be preferred because it places emphasis on an action or result rather than on the person performing the action. In the narrative of a lab report, for instance, actions and results matter much more than the person running the experiment; thus, in this context, the passive voice is entirely appropriate. Since many students work explicitly on their writing in college humanities classes, however, they may find themselves tasked with changing passive voice constructions to active ones. This handout can help students to better understand the differences between the two voices, which can empower them to make deliberate choices in expression.

Active verbs occur when the subject of the sentence *performs* the action of the sentence. The person or thing performing an action is called the *agent*. Passive voice occurs when the subject is the *recipient* of the action.

**Passive:** The man **was bitten** by the dog. **Active:** The dog **bit** the man.

**Passive:** Mistakes **were made** by the president. **Active**: The president **made** mistakes.

**Passive:** The pencil **was** **sharpened** by me. **Active:** I **sharpened** the pencil.

Sometimes the agent of an action is unknown, which is one reason writers use the passive voice. Other times, de-emphasizing the agent of an action could be a way to soften the statement, as in “The man was bitten.” If the situation calls for sensitivity toward the dog owner, a passive voice construction that refrains from attributing the action of biting to the dog could be one way to exercise care in expression. Of course, leaving off the agent of the action in a sentence does convey a more vague sense of an event. Readers are left guessing about who performed the action, which could be a problem if there’s a sense that the writer is intentionally obfuscating the agent to avoid taking responsibility. Such is the case with the example, “Mistakes were made.” A wide range of presidents, including Ulysses S. Grant, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush, have used this expression as what political analyst Bill Schneider terms a “past exonerative,” a way to acknowledge wrongdoing without exactly apologizing for it. The following examples leave the agent unnamed, which may or may not be an appropriate thing to do, depending on the context.

The man **was bitten**. Mistakes **were made**. The pencil **was sharpened**.

Since some disciplines favor passive constructions more than others, it’s a good idea to either clarify with your instructor or try to observe whether the discipline you’re writing in tends to use them. If you receive instructor feedback directing you to change your passive constructions to active, the following tips can support you in doing so.

## How do I change passive constructions into active constructions?

1. **Identify the passive verb.** Go through your whole paper and circle every instance of *to be* verbs: *am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been*.

Not every *to be* verb indicates passive voice, but many of them do. To identify passive voice, look for past participles, which often end in *-ed* (selected, loaded, side-swiped, bitten, delivered) that are next to a *to be* verb.

 Fred **was** [*to be* verb] **selected** [past participle] by his peers to serve on the student council.

 Linda **was** [*to be* verb] **fired** [past participle] by the supervisor on duty.

Passive voice can occur in many different tenses. So to identify a passive verb form, always look for boththe past participle and a form of *to be.* The sentence below contains two examples of the passive construction in different tenses.

 The van **had been loaded** with cream pies when it **was side‑swiped.**

You also regularly find passive voice in present tense:

 The van that **is parked** on the street is full of cream pies.

1. **Locate** the agent who actually performs the action.

 Fred was selected by **his peers** to serve on the student council.

 Linda was fired by **the supervisor.**

1. Put the two together in the active construction.

Fred’s peers selected him to serve on the student council.

 The supervisor fired Linda.

**Passive Agency**

All sentences written in the passive voice have **passive agency**. Passive agency happens whenever the agent of an action is not the subject of the sentence. Sometimes the agent is the object of a preposition (Linda was fired by **the supervisor.).** Other times the agent falls out of the sentence entirely, so there is no way to tell who did the action of the sentence (Linda was fired.) Passive agency also happens when a writer *nominalizes* a verb (turns it into a noun) and makes that noun the subject of the sentence.

**Example:** Scolding occurred between Mavis and Anne.

Sentences like this one are technically active voice. The verb (“scold”) has been turned into a noun (“scolding”) that acts as the subject of the sentence. But the true agent of the action is impossible to identify. Readers can find this frustrating. We tend to prefer flesh-and-blood actors (like “**Mavis**”) and active verbs (like “scolded”). Sometimes there are good reasons to use passive agency. For instance, science writers and social science writers use passive agency when the agent of an action is unknown (“The market went up 10 points.”). If there is no good rhetorical reason to bury the agent, eliminate passive agency to improve clarity and readability (“**Mavis** scolded Anne.”).

Source referenced: Memmott, Mark. “It’s True: ‘Mistakes Were Made’ Is the King of Non-Apologies.” *NPR,* <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2013/05/14/183924858/its-true-mistakes-were-made-is-the-king-of-non-apologies>. Accessed 27 July 2020.