

Learning Centre

Passive Verbs

Learning how to identify Passive Verbs in your writing will help you improve the clarity of your writing because passive verbs often (not always) lead to vague sentences. The first part of the handout shows you examples of active and passive sentences to help you see the difference between active and passive verbs without too much grammatical explanation. The second half of the handout deals more with the grammar.

Clues for Identifying Passive sentences:

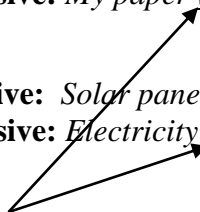
First, notice that an active sentence and a passive sentence each state the same idea, but they use a different word order:

Active: *Kam reviewed my paper.*

Passive: *My paper was reviewed by Kam.*

Active: *Solar panels produce electricity.*

Passive: *Electricity is produced by solar panels.*



Look for the “be” helping verb.

One way to spot passive verbs in your writing is to look for “be” verbs.

“Be” verbs include ***be, am, are, is, been, being, was, and were.***

Often, but not always, a “be” verb signals a passive verb. The arrows above point to the “be” verbs in the example passive sentences. It is important to know, as well, that some other verbs called “linking verbs” can function as “be” verbs in passive sentences, such as “feel” (*Bob felt embarrassed by the insensitive remarks.*).

Notice in the following exercise that every sentence has the same mistake--a missing “be” helping verb.

Correct the following sentences by adding the correct “be” verb.

1. Some of Nancy’s dishes made of silver.
2. Nicholas called Nick by his friends.
3. Textbooks should not used in the examination room.
4. Dinner had finished for two hours by the time Jack arrived to eat.

Answers:

1. **are** made 2. **was** called 3. should **be** used 4. had **been** finished

Look for a “by” phrase.

Another clue that will sometimes help you spot passive verbs is the “by” phrase after the verb. You might have noticed already that it is possible to show the “doer” (the person or thing that does the action) at the end of most passive sentences by adding a “by” phrase.

For example, in the table above, the phrase “by scientists” can be added to every sentence in the passive column. This “by phrase” identifies the doer of the action. Who does the experiments? The answer is “*scientists*.”

One more example:

Many forest fires are started by lightning.

The “by” phrase tells us who or what causes the action:

-what starts many forest fires? → *lightning*.

Do not confuse Passive verbs with Past Tense verbs.

A common misunderstanding about passive verbs is that they are “past tense” verbs. The following example sentences show that passive verbs can appear in any time, whether present, past, or future. “Passive” does not show “time.” Once again, notice the “be” verbs in every passive sentence below.

| Active | Passive |
|---|---|
| Simple Present | |
| <i>Scientists perform experiments.</i> | <i>Experiments <u>are performed</u> (by scientists*).</i> |
| Present Progressive | |
| <i>Scientists are performing experiments.</i> | <i>Experiments <u>are being performed</u>.</i> |
| Simple Past | |
| <i>Scientists performed experiments.</i> | <i>Experiments <u>were performed</u>.</i> |
| Past Progressive | |
| <i>Scientists were doing experiments.</i> | <i>Experiments <u>were being performed</u>.</i> |
| Present Perfect | |
| <i>Scientists have performed experiments.</i> | <i>Experiments <u>have been performed</u>.</i> |
| Simple Future | |
| <i>Scientists will perform experiments.</i> | <i>Experiments <u>will be performed</u>.</i> |

*Each passive sentence above can include or omit the “by” phrase: “*by scientists*”

The Grammar Explanation

A more **grammatical** way to understand passive verbs is to notice how an active sentence is structured differently from a passive sentence.

What is an Active Sentence?

An active sentence begins with the Subject of the sentence; the Subject is the person or thing that does an action—the doer. The active sentence “*Kam reviewed my paper*” begins with the person who is responsible for the action → *Kam*. The sentence ends with the object (the object that received the action from the doer), in this case, *my paper*. See the grammatical structure below:

Subject (the doer) + Verb (the action) + Object (what received the action)

To identify the subject, you can ask “Who or what causes the action?”

In the active sentence “*Solar panels produce electricity*,” the subject which causes the action of producing electricity is “*Solar panels*.”

What is a Passive Sentence?

A passive sentence is almost the reverse of an active sentence because the object of the verb (what was acted upon) moves to the front position, and the subject (the doer) moves to the end (usually as a “by phrase”).

Object + “be” + Verb + (optional “by” phrase).

The car + was stolen + (by somebody).

Let’s look at two of our example sentences again to see these grammatical parts:

Active: *Somebody stole my car.*

Active: *Solar panels produce electricity.*

Passive: *My car was stolen (by somebody).* Passive: *Electricity is produced by solar panels.*

In summary, the grammatical explanation is that the object of an active sentence moves to the front of a passive sentence, and the subject of an active sentence either moves to the end of a passive sentence in a “by” phrase or is omitted altogether.

Past Participles

One final grammatical characteristic of passive verbs is that the main verb uses **the Past Participle** form (or spelling). In the table below, notice the difference between simple past tense and the Past Participle forms of some common verbs:

| Verb | Past Tense | Past Participle |
|--------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| <i>eat</i> | <i>ate</i> | <i>eaten</i> |
| <i>is</i> | <i>was</i> | <i>been</i> |
| <i>break</i> | <i>broke</i> | <i>broken</i> |
| <i>steal</i> | <i>stole</i> | <i>stolen</i> |
| <i>go</i> | <i>went</i> | <i>gone</i> |
| | | |
| <i>offer</i> | <i>offered</i> | <i>offered</i> |
| <i>check</i> | <i>checked</i> | <i>checked</i> |

You can see in the table above that some Past Participle verb forms (such as *eat* and *steal*) are clearly spelled differently than their simple past tense form (*ate/eaten* and *stole/stolen*).

However, the final two examples (*offer* and *check*) have the same spelling in both past tense and past participle forms because both the past tense and past participle forms end with “*ed*.” This “*ed*” ending is one reason why passive verbs are often confused with past tense verbs.

So, be careful: Do not confuse the past participle with the simple past tense.

Why should you avoid using passive sentences?

Passive verbs often lead to wordy sentences that are hard to follow. One reason is that passive sentences use more complex verbs (be + past participle). For example, a passive sentence like *“The original purpose was forgotten by the patient”* is quite wordy compared to the more active *“The patient forgot the original purpose.”* Passive sentences also tend to be vague because they often do not let the reader know who performed the action. For example, in the sentence *“An investigation was initiated and interviews were conducted,”* the reader does not know who is doing the interviews, so it is difficult to gauge the purpose or rigor of the investigation. In the active version of this sentence, *“The homicide squad initiated the investigation and conducted interviews,”* the reader immediately finds out more useful and direct information—that it’s a homicide investigation led by detectives.

When is using a passive sentence okay?

Passive sentences work well when who is doing the action does not matter. More important are the action itself (the verb) and the recipient of the action (the object).

Look at this example: *“Movies are often illegally downloaded from the internet.”* This passive sentence does not tell us who downloaded these movies because the people who do the *“downloading”* are not important to what this sentence emphasizes; more important is that an illegal activity is happening. To make this sentence active, we would have to add a subject or “doer” of the action, such as *“People illegally download many movies.”* However, because who downloads these movies is not the important information in this sentence, a passive sentence works better by omitting *“People”* because the focus is on the downloading of movies, not on who does it.

Here is another example: *“Breakfast is served every morning.”* Again, in this sentence what is important is that *“Breakfast is served;”* who serves the breakfast is not the focus of the sentence.

Exercises:

The following exercises will give you practice with passive verb forms. Cover the answers before you try the exercises.

Change the following active sentences into passive sentences.

1. Bob plays football
2. The reviewer is finally reading my short story.
3. Bill finished his paper before midnight.
4. Carla was looking after Mary's son.
5. Unsanitary conditions cause many health problems.
6. Charles has read many books about anatomy.
7. Helen will pick up this book.

Answers:

1. Football is played by Bob.
2. My short story is finally being read by the reviewer.
3. His paper was finished before midnight.
4. Mary's son was being looked after by Carla.
5. Many health problems are caused by unsanitary conditions.
6. Many anatomy books have been read by Charles.
7. This book will be picked up by Helen.

Change the following passive sentences into active sentences. Some sentences have two passive verbs. With some sentences, you will need to create a subject.

1. Why have my requests been ignored?
2. This paper was written to report my findings.
3. I was surprised by your angry outburst.
4. Josh was bored by the instructor's meaningless stories.
5. I was confused by the announcement that all classes were cancelled.
6. The old, rusted bombs that were found in the ruined outpost were exploded by the explosives disposal unit.
7. Laws have been updated to match modern realities.

Answers:

1. Why have they ignored my requests?
2. I wrote this paper to report my findings.
3. Your angry outburst surprised me.
4. The instructor's meaningless stories bored Josh.
5. The announcement that the college cancelled all classes confused me.
6. The explosives disposal unit exploded the old, rusted bombs that soldiers found in the ruined outpost.
7. Politicians have updated many laws to match modern realities.