

Passive Voice

What is passive voice?

Passive voice (also known as passive construction) is when the object of the sentence becomes the subject

A normal sentence usually has a **subject**, **verb**, and **object**.

Angela **bought** apples.

Mike **attended** the meeting.

Students **took** the test.

A passive voice sentence has **no subject** or a **delayed subject**, a **“to be” verb**,¹ and starts with an **object**.

Apples **were bought**. (no subject)

The meeting **was attended** by Mike. (delayed subject)

The test **was taken** by students. (delayed subject)

Why do we avoid passive voice?

Passive voice is dangerous because it allows the author to avoid assigning responsibility.² Consider the following sentences:

Active:

George **made** a terrible mistake.

Passive:

Terrible mistakes **were made**.

Passive voice also uses “to be” verbs, which clog down writing, and when a lot of passive voice is used, the writing ends up becoming unclear and difficult for the reader to understand. That being said, passive voice can be appropriate when the subject of the sentence is unknown or in APA research papers where the research is considered more important than the subject.

How do I identify passive voice?

Look for “to be” verbs

Look for sentences that end with a verb or the phrase “By _____”.

References:

1. See the “Wordy and Awkward Sentences” handout for more information on “to be” verbs
2. Passive voice is especially frowned upon for Communications majors for this reason.