



Passive vs. Active Voice Tip Sheet

Voice is the form of a verb that shows whether the subject is performing the action.

There are two voices: passive and active. Only action verbs indicate the active voice; linking verbs cannot.

If the subject of a verb **performs** the action, the voice is **active**.

The captain *instructed* the crew.

Telegraph messages *gathered* on the desk.

If the subject **receives** the action, the voice is **passive**.

The crew *was instructed* by the captain.

The telegraph messages *were gathered* on the desk.

A passive verb is always a phrase made from a form of **be + the past participle of a verb**.

More examples of passive and active construction:

Passive: Convenience and efficiency have been delivered by the telephone.

Active: The telephone delivered convenience and efficiency.

Passive: The order must have been canceled by one of the managers.

Active: One of the managers must have canceled the order.

Passive: The audit will be performed by Jane.

Active: Jane will perform the audit.

Note the different effects passive and active sentence structure achieve. Passive voice emphasizes what the subject is performing or acting on, while active voice highlights the subject itself.

In academic writing, use of passive or active voice varies by subject. Active voice is generally favored in subjects like Business and Communications, while passive voice is typically used when writing for Kinesiology or Chemistry courses. Always be sure to check with your course instructor if you're unsure as to whether passive or active sentence construction is preferred!