

# Active vs. Passive Voice

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In most papers you'll write for college, your professors will encourage you to write in active voice. Active voice means that you avoid passive verbs, which are any form of the verb "to be" (*am, are, is, was, were, be, being, been*). Writing in the passive voice tends to be wordy, and it's often difficult to tell who is doing what.

When we read, we expect to find the subject at the beginning of the sentence. We expect the verb to come right after the subject. You'll find writing much easier if you think of sentences as following this formula:

## Subject + verb = sentence

"Subject + verb = sentence" is the writing equivalent of " $2 + 2 = 4$ ." It works **every** time, without fail. In this formula, the subject is in the "subject position" and the verb is in the "verb position."

## Making People the Subjects of Sentences

Sentences are easier to understand when we write about *someone* doing *something*. Make people the subjects of sentences. We then call that subject an "actor." Put the "actor" in the "subject position."

You can make people the subjects of sentences in four ways, including:

- Use a person's name
- Use a pronoun
- Use a collective noun
- Use imperative voice

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|-------------------------|---|
| <b>Pronouns</b>         | I, me, mine, you, yours, yourself, he, him, his, himself, her, hers, herself, she, ours, theirs, they, their, them, themselves  |
| <b>Collective nouns</b> | Collective nouns refer to a group of people like doctors, students, athletes, teachers, and so on.  |
| <b>Imperative voice</b> | Imperative voice indicates a command, like <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sit</li><li>• Stop</li><li>• Stand</li><li>• Listen</li></ul> <p>The implied subject in each of these sentences is <i>you</i>. Since <i>you</i> is a pronoun, it follows our rule. Technical writers frequently write directions, which always start with imperative statements.</p> |

## Eliminating Passive Voice

Sentences written in active voice are shorter than sentences written in passive voice. Because of this, sentences written in active voice tend to be more clear.

In some disciplines, like the sciences, writers are encouraged to use passive voice because it places the emphasis on the experiment or the research rather than on the person doing the experiment or research.

Passive voice includes any form of the verb “to be”:

**Am, are, is, was, were, be, being, been**

Passive verbs need help from other words, which makes sentences longer. Passive voice isn't necessarily bad. It's just indirect and wordy in a written document.

We can use passive voice:

- If we're describing something  
*Lab samples are in green, yellow, and red glass tubes.*
- If we don't care who performed the action  
*Lab samples are collected at noon.*

In sentences written in passive voice, you'll often find the actor in a prepositional phrase that starts with the word “by.”

The law was passed *by the senators*.

Put the verb next to the actor (the subject of the sentence). Put the action in the verb. Follow the formula

**Subject + verb = sentence**

You'll find that it's almost impossible to use passive voice when you write sentences that start with a subject that is an actor closely followed by a verb.