

Passive Voice

Generally, we write using active voice (like this sentence) where the subject performs an action (*we write*). Writers have another alternative when penning sentences: passive voice. In this case, the “subject” of the sentence does not perform the action. For example, I could have constructed the opening sentence of this explanation in passive voice, like this:

Most sentences are written in active voice.

In this example, the noun *sentences* works as the subject, but the sentences don’t actually do anything. Here, the real performer of the action is not named (we don’t know who actually wrote the sentences). Often, to keep the passive voice sentence clear, writers insert the word *by* to indicate who actually performed the action (see examples below).

When writing, we engage readers better by using active voice. Generally, we should avoid passive construction, so that means removing those that slip into our writing. How do we find passive voice to remove it?

To find passive voice, locate the verb. If no named subject completes the action OR the named subject comes after the action in the form of *by* + *subject*, the sentence is passive.

Active: Judy conducted the meeting.

Passive: The meeting was conducted by Judy.

Passive voice generally looks like this pattern:

Recipient of action + *to be* verb + past participle + preposition *by* and the performer of the action (sometimes)

Passive: The missing wallet was found by my neighbor.

The cookies were eaten by Mom.

The party was thrown for the movie star.

The steak is being eaten by the dog.

<u>Recipient of the action</u>	<u>to be verb</u>	<u>past participle</u>	<u>by + the performer of action</u>
The missing wallet	was	found	by my neighbor
The cookies	were	eaten	by Mom
The party	was	thrown	(we don’t know who threw the party)
The steak	is being	eaten	by the dog
Most sentences	are	written	(we don’t know who wrote)
The meeting	was	conducted	by Judy

Active: My neighbor found the missing wallet. (The performer of the action is the subject)

Mom ate the cookies.

(Someone) threw a party for the movie star.

The dog is eating the steak.

Use passive voice ONLY when you don’t know who performed the action or if you’d rather not

say who performed the action (evade the truth) or if you want to tone down an accusation.

When the writer doesn't know who performed the action, they will usually leave off the *by* + *subject* (performer) as in this example from a newspaper article:

A large stage has been constructed at the Shakespeare Festival.

<u>Recipient of the action</u>	<u>to be verb</u>	<u>past participle</u>	<u>by + the performer of action</u>
A large stage	has been	constructed	(Who constructed the stage? We don't know.)

Note that in the example *Most sentences are written in active voice*, I left off the *by* + *subject* as I didn't know who the writer was.

Here's an example from a bank who wants to evade the truth. They obviously don't want to take responsibility for the error.

An error has occurred with your account, but every attempt was made to remedy it.

<u>Recipient of the action</u>	<u>to be verb</u>	<u>past participle</u>	<u>by and the performer of action</u>
Every attempt	was	made	(not admitted who did it)

Honest and responsible businesses will write in active voice:

We made an error with your account, but we've made every attempt to remedy it.