

Passive vs. Active Voice

You can recognize passive-voice expressions because the verb phrase will always include a form of *to be*, such as *am*, *is*, *was*, *were*, *are*, or *been*. The presence of a *be*-verb, however, does not necessarily mean that the sentence is in passive voice. In sentences written in passive voice, the subject receives the action expressed in the verb; the subject is acted upon. In sentences written in active voice, the subject performs the action expressed in the verb; the subject acts.

1. What's the action of the sentence?
2. Who is the subject, or focus of the sentence?
3. Who is doing the action?
4. #2 and #3 should match—if not it is passive

EXAMPLES:

Subject= "I" Action= "selected" Doing the action= "band leader"
(Passive) *I was selected to be the tuba player by the band leader.*

Subject= "bandleader" Action= "selected" Doing the action= "bandleader"
(Active) The bandleader selected me to be the tuba player.

(Passive) *I will be prepared for college as a result of the lessons my mother taught me.*
(Active) My mother taught me lessons that will prepare me for college

(Passive) *I am reminded of her voice every time I hear that song.*
(Active) That song reminds me of her voice.

Changing Passive Voice to Active Voice

If you want to change a passive-voice sentence to active voice, find the agent in the phrase, the person or thing that is performing the action expressed in the verb. Make that agent the subject of the sentence, and change the verb accordingly.

1. Look for forms of *to be*, such as *am*, *is*, *was*, *were*, *are*, or *been*.
2. Look at the action verb that follows, and ask who or what is performing the action.
4. Rewrite the sentence with who or what performing the action at the beginning (as the subject).

Change these sentences from passive voice to active voice, or note if no change should be made.

1. I was taught by my brother the principles of barbecuing.

2. My father was given the title by the former head chief.

3. Research will be presented by Sally at the conference.

4. The house is a mess, the cat is lost, and the car has been stolen by Justin.

5. Unfortunately, my plan was ruined by Gerald, the building superintendent.

6. Experiments have been conducted to test the hypothesis.

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7. The ball was thrown by Lucy, who had been hiding in the bushes.

8. Francesca was placed on the first flight to Boston. Her father put her there.

9. The boy was bitten by the dog.

10. Action on the bill is being considered by the committee.
