

Active and Passive Voice

In a sentence, main verbs can be in active or passive voice. A main verb is **active** when the subject of the sentence is the **doer** (or the **agent**) of the action. A main verb is **passive** when the subject of the sentence is the **receiver** of the action. In passive voice, the verb is composed of a form of “to be” (e.g. *is, is being, was, will be*) + the past participle form of the verb (e.g. *watched, stolen, made, seen*). This is how passive is formed in different tenses:

Tense	Simple	Progressive	Perfect
Present	it is explained	it is being explained	it has been explained
Past	it was explained	it was being explained	it had been explained
Future	it will be explained	it will be being explained*	it will have been explained*

*These forms as well as the forms in the perfect progressive aspect (not included here) are uncommon.

The agent of the action is not usually stated in a passive voice sentence. When it is, it is placed in a “by” prepositional phrase:

Active	Passive
The sports fans are applauding Jess.	Jess <i>is being</i> applauded [by the sports fans].
We made mistakes.	Mistakes <i>were</i> made [by us].
I will fix the problem.	The problem <i>will be</i> fixed [by me].

Not all verbs take passive voice. For example, someone cannot *be exercised* by somebody else. Such verbs are called intransitive (other examples include *die, happen, occur, exist, arrive, belong, and depend*).

When should active voice be used?

Sentences containing active voice can be easier to process and understand than passive voice sentences. This is because they provide more information (the agent of the action), and possibly because native English speakers are accustomed to receiving the information in the order *agent-action-receiver*. Active voice sentences may be more concise than passive voice sentences because they eliminate the need for a helping verb “be” and the preposition “by.” In the example below, note how placing emphasis on the agent (wealthy business CEOs) makes the sentence more informative and meaningful:

Active: Wealthy business CEOs forced low-income renters to leave their neighborhoods to make room for large scaled urban development.

Passive: Low-income renters were forced to leave their neighborhoods to make room for large scaled urban development.

Because readers may experience active voice sentences as clearer than passive voice sentences, professional writers are often urged to limit the use of passive voice. In academic writing, only around 25% of all verbs are used in passive voice, with the Natural Sciences and Engineering using it more frequently, and the Humanities using it least.

When should passive voice be used?

Passive voice is frequently used in lab reports and Methods sections of research reports because it puts the emphasis on the experiment or process being described rather than on the researcher. In the examples below, note how omitting the agent of the action emphasizes the experiment itself and excludes irrelevant information:

Active: The scientist heated the solution to the boiling point.

Passive: The solution was heated to the boiling point.

Passive voice is also appropriate in the following cases:

- when a writer wants to de-emphasize who or what is responsible for a given action/problem
- when the agent is unknown
- when the recipient is a part of the “known” information, and it should start the sentence (see the handout “Improving Cohesion: The Known/New Contract”)

Passive Infinitives and Modals

Infinitives, the indefinite form of verbs (e.g. *to do, to examine, to identify*), can also take passive voice (e.g. *to be done, to be examined, to be identified*). As in the case of tensed verbs, passive infinitives are formed with the help of “be” and past participle:

This topic needs **to be examined** in more detail.

The research deserves **to be sent** for publication.

The same principle applies to modal verbs (e.g. *can, could, may, might, should, must*).

This topic **should be examined** in more detail.

The research **can be sent** for publication.

Adjectives in Active and Passive Voice

In some cases, adjectives, formed from verbs, might express active and passive voice through the endings **-ing** and **-ed**. For example:

Active: a boring person – a person makes others bored

Passive: a bored person – someone/something made a person bored

In other words, an adjective with the ending **-ing** shows that the person/thing causes the action, while the ending **-ed** shows that the person/thing is the recipient of the action (i.e. someone/something else made the person/thing experience a certain emotion/condition).

Other common **-ing/-ed** adjectives include: annoying-annoyed, confusing-confused, entertaining-entertained, exciting-excited, interesting-interested, satisfying-satisfied, shocking-shocked, and tiring-tired.

Practice

Identify passive voice in this passage and determine the reason for its use.

The parliament is the only institution that answers directly to the European citizens. European wide elections are held over the course of three days every five years to elect the representatives. While the Parliaments power was limited in the early years of the Union, its powers increased significantly with the Maastricht, Amsterdam, and Nice Treaties in an effort to improve the democratic legitimacy of the EU.

The Parliaments powers in the early stages of the union were non-existent. Until the debate over the EU's democratic legitimacy began, the Parliaments role was to consult with and deliver an opinion to the Commission and Council of Ministers concerning proposals and legislation. The Commission and Council of Ministers had to consult with the EP when creating legislation, but were not required to adhere to the Parliaments recommendations or opinions. Today, the parliament has the right of co-decision. Under this procedure no text can be adopted without the formal agreement of both the Council and Parliament.

While the EP wields significant power in the EU, its democratic legitimacy is undermined by institutional loopholes. The first loophole is the policy areas where the Council and Commission do not need to include the EP in the entire decision-making process. In some key policy areas, the Parliament cannot change or amend legislation. Instead, the EP only votes to accept or reject legislation, a significant difference in power compared to the co-decision procedure. Some of the key policy areas that are left out include agriculture policy, taxation, economic policy, citizenship policy, and the revision of treaties.

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