

Active vs. Passive Voice

Passive

A matter of structure, NOT time. Do not confuse passive voice with past tense.

In passive voice, the subject of the sentence receives the action of the verb. Thus, passive voice emphasizes the receiver of the action, minimizes the role of the doer, and results in both wordier and less precise sentences. It also deflects responsibility, while as a writer you want to develop ownership of your ideas. It is, however, appropriate when the doer of the action is unknown or unimportant (generally with science and business essays).

Basic sentence structure: Object + Verb + (Subject)

A **creature** + was built

Notice that in this sentence we do not know WHO or WHAT builds the creature. Thus, the sentence is vague and negates the role of the “doer.”

The passive verb is always a verb phrase that consists of a form of the verb “to be” plus a participle. It either looks like:

“to be” + participle	The cake <u>was eaten</u>
or “to be” + participle + by	The cake <u>was eaten</u> by John.

-Note that in the second example we know WHO does the action. Still, this is a wordier sentence than when we use active voice.

Forms of “to be”:

Present passive: am, is, are

Past passive: was, were, being, been

Past participles: This is the most common form of the passive verb. You form it when you combine a “to be” verb with an *-ed* form of another verb. For example: is formed, was formed. We have taken the verb “form” and combined it with a form of “to be.”

Present Participle: Formed with a “to be” verb + an *-ing* verb to make the “progressive tense.” This tense indicates ongoing action, and slows down the language of the sentence. Thus, avoid this tense whenever you write an essay. To change this tense to active, simply omit the “be” verb and emphasize the *-ing* verb.

She <u>is planning</u> next year’s strategy.	→	She <u>plans</u> next year’s strategy.
He <u>was running</u> the race.	→	He <u>ran</u> the race.

Active

In active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action of the verb. To accomplish this, the subject that does the action is always BEFORE the verb.

Basic sentence structure: Subject + Verb + Direct Object

Dr. Frankenstein + built + a creature

Frankenstein, the man who built the creature, is before the verb “built,” while the creature, who received the action of “built,” follows the verb.

John ate the cake
Subj. Verb D.O.

To Change Passive to Active:

If the sentence has the preposition “by:” drop the “be” verb and emphasize the participle.

Karen is driven to school by **Yolanda**.

First, we drop “was” and “by,” for we do not need them in our active sentence. Next, we place Yolanda, the “doer,” at the beginning of the sentence. Finally, we let the verb separate the subject (Yolanda) from the object (Karen) of the sentence. Now the sentence reads:

Yolanda driven **Karen** to school.

However, now *driven* is the incorrect form of the verb “drive.” To make the sentence correct, we simply choose the right form of the verb. Since the original verb phrase “is driven” is in present tense, then our new verb must be in present tense as well. Thus, driven → drives. So our final sentence reads:

Yolanda *drives* **Karen** to school.

If the sentence lacks the preposition “by” (and thus, is vaguer):

Karen is driven to school.

In this sentence, the reader does not know WHO drives Karen to school. Thus, when changing a sentence such as this from passive to active, you must add in the missing information. In our case, that missing information is Yolanda. Again, we eliminate the “be” verb and emphasize the participle, and place the verb between the subject (Yolanda) and the object (Karen):

Yolanda *driven* **Karen** to school.

Like in the previous example, we must once again convert *driven* to the correct verb tense. Thus, *driven* → *drives*. So our final sentence reads:

Yolanda drives Karen to school.

One final piece of information: If your passive verb is also in past tense, you must change it to **present tense** for all of your literary essays. Thus,

Was driven → drives

Were running → run

Was going → goes

Subject-Verb Agreement

In each clause of a sentence, the subject(s) and verb(s) must “agree.” That is, a singular subject is paired with a singular verb, and plural subjects are paired with plural verbs. However, there is one tricky thing about English to remember:

Generally, while plural **subjects** in English end with an “S,” their corresponding *present tense verbs* do not.

Dogs run through the street.

Jeff and Matt went to the store

Similarly, while a singular **subject** does not end with an “S,” its corresponding *present tense verb* does.

The **dog** runs through the street.

Jeff goes to the store

For the past tense, the *-ed* ending of the verbs is in effect (except for irregular verbs).

Amy realized that she forgot her homework

Subj Verb

Amy and **Jack** both realized that they forgot their homework

Subj 1 Subj 2 Verb

Amy and **Jack** first went to school then realized that they forgot their homework.

Subj 1 Subj 2 V1 V 2

When a singular subject completes multiple actions, each verb is singular:

The **potato chip** smells good and crunches in my mouth. (Present)

Subject Verb 1 Verb 2

The **potato chip** smelled good and crunched in my mouth. (Past)

Subject Verb 1 Verb 2

Be careful when you have multiple subjects completing the same singular action, for a plural verb must always be used:

A sheet of **paper**, a **pencil**, and **lip gloss** fall out of the book bag. (Present)

Subj 1 Subj 2 Subj 3 Verb

A sheet of **paper**, a **pencil**, and **lip gloss** fell out of the book bag. (Past)

Subj 1 Subj 2 Subj 3 Verb

Similarly, when you have multiple subjects and multiple verbs, each verb must also be plural:

The **mayor** and the **governor** argue, spit, and yell during the conference. (Present)
Subj. 1 Subj. 2 V 1 V 2 V 3

The **mayor** and the **governor** argued, spat, and yelled during the conference. (Past)
Subj. 1 Subj. 2 V 1 V 2 V 3

Neither/Either: Sometimes, we want to introduce 2 ideas that have a relationship with each other. The construction of such a sentence is *or*, *nor*, *neither ... nor* or *either ... or*. The verb depends on the **subject** that is closest to the verb.

Neither the **milk** *nor* the **groceries** have been delivered.
Have is plural because **groceries** is plural.

Either the **children** *or* their **mother** is to blame.
Is is singular because **mother** is singular.

A Final note: Be very careful when the subject(s) are separated from the verb(s) by a *prepositional phrase* (beginning with *of*, *as*, *in*, *to*, *on*, *like*, etc.)

One *of the islands* appears to be inhabited.
Subj. Prep. Phrase Verb
Here, **One**, NOT **islands**, is the subject of the sentence. So, the verb is singular.

His **answers** *to our question* change everything.
Subj. Prep. Phrase Verb
Here, **answers**, NOT **question**, is the subject. Therefore, the verb is plural.

My **teacher**, *as well as other faculty members*, opposes the policy.
Subj. Prep. Phrase Verb
Here, teacher, NOT members, is the subject, so the verb is singular.