

Identifying Passive Voice

Learning how to identify passive voice in your writing will help you improve the clarity of your writing. Passive voice is ok to use in academic writing when used appropriately and sparingly. Taking time during your editing process to identify passive sentences will help you become aware of how and when to use them.

Clues for Identifying Passive sentences

First, notice that an active sentence and a passive sentence each state the same idea, but they use a different word order:

Active: *Kam reviewed my paper.*

Passive: *My paper was reviewed by Kam.*

Look for the “be” helping verb.

One way to spot passive verbs in your writing is to look for “be” verbs.

“Be” verbs include *be, am, are, is, been, being, was, and were.*

Often, but not always, a “be” verb signals a passive verb.

Look for a “by” phrase.

Another clue that will sometimes help you spot passive verbs is the “by” phrase after the verb. You might have noticed already that it is possible to show the person or thing that does the action at the end of most passive sentences by adding a “by” phrase.

Example: *Many forest fires are started by lightning.*

The “by” phrase tells us who or what causes the action.

The Grammar Explanation

An active sentence has a different grammatical structure than a passive sentence.

What is an Active Sentence?

An active sentence begins with the Subject of the sentence; the Subject is the doer of the action. Below is the grammatical pattern:

Subject (the doer) + **Verb** (the action) + **Object** (the receiver of the action)

The active sentence “*Kam reviewed my paper*” begins with “the doer,” who/what is responsible for the action à *Kam*. The sentence ends with the object (what received the action from the doer), in this case, *my paper*.

What is a Passive Sentence?

A passive sentence is almost the reverse of an active sentence because the object of the verb (the receiver of the action) moves to the front position, and the subject (the doer of the action) moves to the end (usually as a “by phrase”). Below is the pattern:

Object + “**be**” + **Verb** + (optional “by” phrase).

Experiments + are + performed + (by scientists).

Past Participles

Another important grammatical passive verb feature is the **Past Participle** form of the main verb. In the table below, notice the difference between Simple Past Tense and the Past Participle forms of some common verbs:

Verb	Past Tense	Past Participle
<i>eat</i>	<i>ate</i>	<i>eaten</i>
<i>is</i>	<i>was</i>	<i>been</i>
<i>steal</i>	<i>stole</i>	<i>stolen</i>
<i>offer</i>	<i>offered</i>	<i>offered</i>

You can see in the table above that some Past Participle verb forms are clearly spelled differently than their simple past tense form.

However, the final example (*offer*) has the same spelling in both past tense and past participle forms because both the past tense and past participle forms end with “*ed*.” This “*ed*” ending is a reason why passive verbs can be confused with past tense verbs.

Do not confuse Passive verbs with Past-Tense verbs.

A common misunderstanding about passive verbs is that they are “past tense” verbs. The following example sentences show that passive verbs can appear in the present, past, or future. The Passive Voice does not show “time.” Once again, notice the “be” verbs in every passive sentence below.

Active	Passive
Simple Present	
<i>Scientists perform experiments.</i>	<i>Experiments are performed (by scientists*).</i>
Simple Past	
<i>Scientists performed experiments.</i>	<i>Experiments were performed.</i>
Simple Future	
<i>Scientists will perform experiments.</i>	<i>Experiments will be performed.</i>

*Each passive sentence above can include or omit the “by” phrase: “*by scientists*”

When should you avoid using passive sentences?

Passive verbs often lead to vague and wordy sentences because they use more complex verbs (be + past participle). Notice below how the passive sentence is wordier than the active sentence:

Passive: *The original purpose was forgotten by the patient.*

Active: *The patient forgot the original purpose.*

Passive sentences also tend to be vague because they often leave out who performed the action. For example, in the sentence “*An investigation was initiated, and interviews were conducted,*” the reader does not know who is doing the interviews, so it is difficult to gauge the purpose or rigor of the investigation. In the active version of this sentence, “*The homicide squad initiated the investigation and conducted interviews,*” the reader can learn more information—that homicide detectives led the investigation.

When is using a passive sentence okay?

Passive sentences work well when who/what is doing the action does not matter. More important are the action itself (the verb) and the recipient of the action (the object).

Look at this example: “*Breakfast is served every morning.*” In this sentence, what is important is that “*Breakfast is served,*” but who serves the breakfast doesn’t matter.