

Active and Passive Voice

SUU Writing Center

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The term “voice” is used in grammar to indicate if the structure of a sentence is **active** or **passive**. In active sentences, the doer of the action appears as the subject of the sentence. In passive sentences, the emphasis shifts to the receiver of the action.

Tense:	Active Voice Form	Passive Voice Form
<i>Present</i>	I bake cakes.	The cakes are baked by me.
<i>Past</i>	I baked cakes.	The cakes were baked by me.
<i>Future</i>	I will bake cakes	The cakes will be baked by me.
<i>Present Perfect</i>	I have baked the cakes.	The cakes have been baked by me.
<i>Past Perfect</i>	I had baked the cakes.	The cakes had been baked by me.
<i>Future Perfect</i>	I will have baked the cakes.	The cakes will have been baked by me.

*Note that all passive voice forms consist of the verb “to be” and a past participle (the kind of verb that native speakers use after such helpers as *has*, *have*, or *had*).

Notice how wordy and indirect the above examples are. The “doer” of the action is unclear, and the structure can be puzzling to readers. For this reason, most editors ban the use of the passive voice. However, if you must use the passive voice, you may do so occasionally under the following circumstances:

Passive voice is effective when you are trying:	Example:	Reason for using Passive Voice:
To call attention to the object or person changed by the action of the verb.	Passive voice: The two pieces of leftover cake were consumed. <i>Active voice: Andrew consumed the two pieces of leftover cake.</i>	The writer wished to emphasize the fact that the cake had been consumed, not to identify the individual who had done the consuming.
To indicate the receiver of the action, when its performer is unknown or unimportant	Passive voice: A plate with chocolate crumbs had been left next to the sink. <i>Active voice: Andrew had left a plate with chocolate crumbs next to the sink.</i>	The writer wanted to emphasize that the plate had been left by the sink, not to indicate who had done the leaving.
To avoid calling attention to the performer of the action	Passive voice: The cake-eater will be punished. <i>Active Voice: Mom will punish the cake-eater.</i>	The writer wished to emphasize the fact that justice would be enforced, not to highlight the fact that a specific person would punish another.