Any sentence can be written in either the active or the passive voice. In the **active voice**, the subject of the verb **performs** the action:

- The boy **hit** the ball.
- The zooming car **crossed** the finish line.

In the **passive voice** the subject **receives** the verb’s action:

- The ball **was hit** by the boy.
- The finish line **was crossed** by the zooming car.

The **passive voice** **always** uses a helping verb (usually a form of *to be*). In addition, it often uses a preposition (usually *by*):

- **Active:** The car **struck** the pedestrian.
- **Passive:** The pedestrian **was struck** by the car.

### Why is the active voice more effective than the passive voice?

Sentences in which the subject performs the action are more direct or vivid.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weak</th>
<th>Better</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A new fiscal plan <strong>was drafted</strong> at the staff meeting yesterday.</td>
<td>Yesterday, staff members <strong>drafted</strong> a new fiscal plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hands <strong>were clapped</strong>, cheers <strong>were shouted</strong> and tears <strong>were shed</strong> by the fans when the Cardinals <strong>were declared</strong> winners of the World Series.</td>
<td>Fans <strong>clapped</strong>, <strong>cheered</strong> and <strong>cried</strong> when the Cardinals <strong>won</strong> the World Series.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The active voice emphasizes who or what is performing the action. (In the passive voice, the person or thing performing the action often does not even appear in the sentence.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passive</th>
<th>Active</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mistakes <strong>were made</strong> by me.</td>
<td>I <strong>made</strong> mistakes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often, the by clause <strong>is dropped</strong> entirely by the writer in a passive sentence.</td>
<td>Often, the writer <strong>drops</strong> the by clause entirely in a passive sentence.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Subjects that act require powerful verbs that stimulate the imagination and senses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weak</th>
<th>Better</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Jeep <strong>was driven</strong> down the street.</td>
<td>The Jeep <strong>careened</strong> down the street.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The horse <strong>was ridden</strong> down the lane.</td>
<td>The horse <strong>bolted</strong> down the lane.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sentences using the active voice are more concise.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weak</th>
<th>Better</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The bouquet <strong>was caught</strong> by Molly.</td>
<td>Molly <strong>caught</strong> the bouquet.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Is the passive voice ever a good option?
The passive voice does have legitimate uses. It can be an effective choice when:

- You want to emphasize the receiver of the action, not the doer:
  
  Joplin was leveled by a tornado.
  Ninety interviews were conducted for the report.
  The bill was passed unanimously.

- You do not know who or what performed the action:
  
  The painting was stolen last night.
  The vase was smashed to smithereens.

- You do not want to say who performed an action:

  Layoffs will be announced today.
  Angry words were spoken at the meeting.

- You want to create a particular mood or effect:

  “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights....”

How do I recognize the passive voice?
To test whether or not a sentence is written in the passive voice, ask:

1. What action is being performed?
2. Who is performing the action?
3. Is the performer the subject of the sentence?

Take, for example, the following sentence: The dragon was killed by George.

1. What action is being performed? killed
2. Who is performing the action? George
3. Is the performer the subject of the sentence? No. Therefore, this sentence is constructed in the passive voice.

One last tip: Don’t confuse the passive voice with the past tense.
Just remember this simple rule: You can express any verb tense in active or passive voice.

You can express any verb tense in active or passive voice. (present tense, active voice)

Any verb tense can be expressed in active or passive voice. (present tense, passive voice)

She was taught that any verb tense could be expressed in active or passive voice. (past tense, passive voice)

She learned that she could express any verb tense in active or passive voice. (past tense, active voice)