

WRITING IN THE ACTIVE VOICE

Active voice occurs when a **clear subject** performs a **clear action**.

Active voice helps make writing strong and concise.

The opposite of active voice is *passive voice*, which occurs when a writer pairs a “to-be” verb (*am, are, is, was, were, be, being, been*) with a past tense verb. We consider “to-be” verbs passive because they do not have any action; they only say something exists.

Unless you have a purposeful reason for using passive voice, writers should mainly use the active voice in academic writing.

“Verbs in the passive voice lack strength because their subjects receive the action instead of doing it.”¹

HOW TO REVISE PASSIVE VOICE

1. **Find the action verb** – Usually the verb connected with the “to-be” verb. It often can become your main action.
2. **Decide who or what does the action** – You must have a subject who can perform your new action to write clearly. You can ask yourself, “Who is doing the action?” If no obvious answer appears, you may have to look back at previous sentences or your source material.
Note: If your character is “I” or an abstract idea, you may need to keep the passive voice.
3. **Rearrange your sentence** – Move your new subject and action to the beginning of the sentence. This will make your writing clearer.

Note: Sometimes, you will need to think of a new verb for your sentence to make sense.

EXAMPLE

- Passive voice: The ball was thrown across the room by John.
 - **Find the action verb:** The ball was thrown across the room by John.
 - **Decide who or what does the action:** The ball was thrown across the room *by John*.
Note: Often, the word “by” will hint at who or what does the action!
 - **Rearrange your sentence.**
- Active voice: *John* threw the ball across the room.

PRACTICE NOW

¹ Diana Hacker and Nancy Sommers, *A Writer's Reference*, 7th ed. (New York, NY: Bedford / St. Martin's, 2011), 156.