

# PASSIVE VOICE

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## PASSIVE VOICE

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Linguistics, Grammar, Rhetoric, Stylistics, Psycholinguistics

### 1. Core Definition

The **passive voice** is a fundamental grammatical construction found across many world languages, defined by a specific syntactical rearrangement of the sentence elements. In a clause utilizing the passive voice, the entity that typically functions as the direct object in the equivalent active clause--the patient or recipient of the action--is promoted to the role of the **grammatical subject**. Consequently, the agent, which is the entity performing the action, is either demoted to an optional phrase (often introduced by the preposition "by") or, more frequently in common usage, completely omitted from the sentence structure. This structural inversion fundamentally alters the emphasis and informational hierarchy of the statement, shifting focus away from the actor and toward the result or the recipient of the verbal action.

Linguistically, the passive voice is realized through distinct morphological and auxiliary changes to the verb phrase. In English, the structure requires a form of the auxiliary verb "to be" followed immediately by the main verb in its past participle form (e.g., "is written," "was seen," "has been decided"). This construction contrasts sharply with the **active voice**, which follows the canonical Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) sequence, where the subject is inherently the agent. For example, in the active sentence, "The editor corrected the manuscript," the editor (agent) is the focus. When converted to the passive voice, "The manuscript was corrected by the editor," the manuscript (patient) assumes the subject position, and the agent (editor) becomes peripheral, or could be entirely removed: "The manuscript was corrected."

The definition provided in the source content highlights its application in real-world contexts, noting that "Police officers commonly dictate victim and witness statements in a passive voice." This phenomenon underscores the rhetorical use of the passive construction: by framing statements such as "Evidence was gathered" or "The door was opened," the focus remains strictly on the actions or objects, effectively minimizing the direct involvement or responsibility of the agent (the police officer or the investigative unit) in the narrative. This structural choice lends an air of detached objectivity, which is often sought in official reporting, even if it sacrifices clarity regarding agency.

### 2. Structural Mechanics and Active Contrast

Understanding the passive voice necessitates a clear comprehension of its structural transformation relative to the active voice. The active structure, which is the unmarked or standard form in English, establishes a direct causal relationship: Agent (Subject) acts upon Patient

(Object). For a sentence to be successfully converted into the passive voice, it typically must contain a **transitive verb**--a verb capable of taking a direct object--because that direct object is the element that becomes the new subject. Intransitive verbs, which do not take objects (e.g., "sleep," "arrive"), cannot generally be passivized.

The process of passivization involves three critical steps. First, the active sentence's direct object becomes the subject of the new passive sentence. Second, the main verb is transformed into its past participle form and combined with the appropriate conjugation of the auxiliary verb "to be" (matching the tense of the original active verb). Third, the original subject (the agent) is either deleted entirely, treated as background information, or relocated into a prepositional phrase using "by." The resulting structure, Patient + Be + Past Participle + (by Agent), is linguistically marked, meaning it deviates from the expected word order and often carries greater information density, requiring increased cognitive effort from the reader.

The primary structural difference lies in what linguists term thematic role assignment. In the active voice, the subject generally maps directly to the thematic role of the agent, creating a congruence that aids rapid processing. In the passive voice, the subject maps to the thematic role of the patient, violating this canonical mapping. This non-canonical structure provides flexibility in discourse--allowing writers to manipulate sentence flow by placing known information (the patient/topic) at the beginning of the clause, facilitating smooth transitions between ideas--but this flexibility comes at the cost of syntactic simplicity and, occasionally, ambiguity regarding responsibility.

### 3. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of voice (active, passive, and sometimes middle) has deep roots in Indo-European linguistics, reflecting how actions are perceived in relation to their actors. In classical languages like Latin and Greek, the passive voice was often expressed morphologically; verbs possessed distinct passive endings. For instance, in Latin, the passive structure was built directly onto the verb stem (e.g., *amo*, "I love" vs. *amor*, "I am loved"), without the requirement for a separate auxiliary verb.

As English evolved from Old English--which contained remnants of the older synthetic passive constructions--the language shifted toward an analytic structure, relying on separate auxiliary words rather than morphological endings. By the Middle English period, the modern periphrastic passive structure (using "to be" + participle) became firmly established. This shift allowed for greater productivity and consistency across different verb types. The emergence of the passive voice as a common tool coincided with the development of sophisticated bureaucratic, legal, and scientific prose, fields that inherently seek to describe processes and outcomes independently of human agency.

Throughout the 20th century, the passive voice became a subject of intense prescriptive scrutiny. Influential style guides, most notably William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White's *The Elements of Style*, strongly advocated for the ubiquitous use of the active voice, deeming the passive "weak" and "clumsy." This prescriptive push, while often overly generalized, shaped generations of writers and editors, implanting the idea that passive voice is inherently inferior, regardless of context. This historical critique often overlooks the genuine necessity and rhetorical power the passive voice possesses when used strategically.

#### 4. Linguistic Functions and Strategic Purpose

The use of the passive voice is not merely a stylistic choice but serves several crucial linguistic functions, primarily related to managing information flow and thematic focus within a text.

**Topic Shift and Cohesion:** The passive voice allows the writer to maintain the subject position for an entity that was previously introduced, ensuring sentence-to-sentence coherence. If a paragraph is primarily about "the treaty," it is rhetorically smoother to write, "The treaty was ratified last year," rather than switching abruptly to an active agent.

**Obscuring the Agent:** This is perhaps the most famous function. The agent is often omitted when it is unknown, irrelevant, or when the speaker/writer deliberately wishes to conceal their identity or responsibility. Examples include: "Mistakes were made," or "The decision has been finalized."

**Emphasis on the Action or Patient:** In many scientific and technical writing contexts, the process or the result is far more important than the individual who performed the action. For example, "The samples were heated to 100 degrees Celsius" appropriately focuses on the experimental procedure rather than the scientist (agent) who conducted it.

**Maintaining Objectivity and Impersonality:** In genres requiring a high degree of apparent objectivity, such as academic abstracts, legal statutes, or journalistic reports, the passive voice helps depersonalize the findings. By removing the "I" or "we," the statement appears to emerge from the data itself, enhancing perceived credibility and universality.

#### 5. Rhetorical and Stylistic Implications

The passive voice carries significant rhetorical weight, influencing how an audience interprets agency, responsibility, and power dynamics within a text. Used skillfully, it can imbue prose with authority and formality; used poorly, it leads to obfuscation and grammatical inertia.

In official documents, particularly governmental or legal texts, the passive voice is often deployed to manage liability. If a document states, "The regulation was breached," the lack of an agent makes it difficult to assign blame directly, focusing instead on the state of affairs. Conversely, in political discourse, the strategic omission of the agent in passive constructions such as "Taxes were raised" often serves to deflect accountability away from the political figures responsible for

the action. This manipulative use is the source of much of the negative critique leveled against the construction.

From a stylistic perspective, an overreliance on the passive voice can certainly flatten prose. Active sentences generally inject dynamism into writing because the subject is performing an action. Passive sentences, by placing the result first and utilizing the static auxiliary verb "to be," tend to slow the pacing and can make the writing feel sluggish or overly formal. Expert editors teach writers to use the active voice as a default for clarity and punch, reserving the passive voice only for situations where the thematic focus legitimately requires the patient to be the subject.

## 6. Psychological and Psycholinguistic Processing

Psycholinguistics research investigates how the human brain processes different syntactic structures. Studies have consistently demonstrated that passive constructions generally require greater **cognitive load** to process than their active counterparts. This difference arises because the passive voice inverts the expected SVO word order, forcing the reader to perform an extra step of mapping the grammatical subject (patient) back to the implied thematic agent.

When processing a typical active sentence like "The dog chased the cat," the listener or reader can quickly and efficiently assign the Agent role (dog) to the first noun phrase and the Patient role (cat) to the second. In contrast, the passive construction, "The cat was chased by the dog," requires the brain to hold the subject (cat) in working memory while anticipating the true agent, which arrives later in the sentence within the prepositional phrase. This delay and structural reversal contribute to slower comprehension times and increased susceptibility to misinterpretation, especially in complex or lengthy sentences.

However, research also indicates that context mitigates this effect significantly. If the subject of the passive sentence represents "given" or "old" information (something already known or discussed), and the agent represents "new" information, the sentence aligns with natural discourse flow (old information first, new information last). In these contextually appropriate situations, the processing effort for the passive voice decreases, showing that the difficulty is not inherent in the structure itself, but in its misalignment with the established informational context.

## 7. Debates and Criticisms

The debate surrounding the passive voice is intense, pitting prescriptive grammarians against descriptive linguists.

**Ambiguity and Evasion:** The central criticism is that the passive voice fosters ambiguity. By allowing the agent to be omitted, it enables evasion, particularly in professional, political, and academic settings where accountability is paramount. Critics argue that forcing writers into the

active voice ensures greater transparency regarding who performed an action.

**Wordiness and Lack of Directness:** The passive structure is inherently less concise than the active voice because it requires the auxiliary verb "to be" and the past participle. For instance, "The committee approved the budget" (Active) is significantly shorter and more direct than "The budget was approved by the committee" (Passive).

**Misuse in Academic Contexts:** While scientific writing often requires the passive voice, many university style guides now actively discourage its overuse, arguing that it leads to flat, jargon-heavy prose. The historical attempt to eliminate the "I" or "we" from scientific papers through passive voice is now often seen as an unnecessary stylistic handcuff that sacrifices clarity for outdated notions of objectivity.

Ultimately, the most nuanced perspective holds that the passive voice is a valuable tool, but one that requires strategic application. It is not grammatically "wrong," but it is rhetorically marked. Effective writing necessitates using the active voice as the default and deploying the passive voice only when a specific, strategic linguistic goal--such as focusing on the patient, managing topic flow, or dealing with an unknown agent--is achieved more effectively through the inverted structure.

## Further Reading

[Passive Voice \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Passive Voice in English Grammar \(Oxford Reference\)](#)

[Using Active and Passive Voice \(Purdue OWL\)](#)