

Passive Vs. Active Voice in your Writing

Stan C. Smith

First, let's figure out exactly what this is all about.

If a complete sentence has a verb (or action), the sentence will usually also have a **subject** (the person or thing), an **object** (the thing that is being affected by the verb), and an **action** (the verb).

Active voice — when the **subject** appears at the beginning of the sentence and performs an **action**.

*The **cat** **chased** the **mouse***

Passive voice — the **subject** often appears after the **action**.

*The **mouse** was **chased** by the **cat**.*

And sometimes there is no subject in the sentence, only the **object** and the **action**.

*The **mouse** was **chased**.*

How to recognize passive sentences:

Passive sentences often use a form of the verb “to be.” Such as “is,” “was,” “have been,” “can be,” etc.

That **window** was **smashed** into pieces by those **kids next door**.

This **project** can be **completed** by any **DIYer**.

The **ball** is being **chased** by the **dog**.

I have been **cheated** by those nasty **scammers**.

IMPORTANT:

In general, it is better to write most of your sentences in **ACTIVE VOICE**.

After all, active voice is all about *action*. And active voice usually requires *fewer words*.

However, there are many instances in which **PASSIVE VOICE** is suitable, or even better.

When to use passive voice:

1. To show that a character really is being passive

Perhaps you want to show your character's emotional state:

Jake was soaked by the rain as he wandered aimlessly up 9th Street.

Or perhaps you want to show that a character is reactive, always allowing things to happen to him:

From *Sea of Tranquility* by Emily St. John Mandel:

In a flash of wild optimism, Edwin has his occupation recorded as ‘farmer’ on the ship’s manifest. It occurs to him later, in a contemplative moment out on deck, that he’s never so much as touched a spade.

2. To draw attention to a particular idea in the sentence

Perhaps you want the object of the sentence to be the focus of attention. In this case you can put the object first and the subject last (a passive sentence):

In the tumbledown house lived a little old lady.

Think about it... *A little old lady lived in a tumbledown house* just doesn’t have the same impact, right?

3. If you don’t want to reveal who did the action (the subject)

In a first-person story, perhaps you want the reader to know the character does not know who did something:

My window was smashed last night.

A car was broken into on Elm Street last night.

Cash was stolen from the register.

The rats were placed into the maze.

4. You want to show that a character is very formal in the way they think and speak

“Shoes should be removed before entering my house!”

5. When you want to show that an action is happening now, instead of showing that the action has already taken place

The ground beneath her feet disappeared. For a second, she was falling. She glimpsed water below.

For a second, she fell. ← This sounds like she is finished falling before she glimpses water below.

I could rewrite the sentences like this: For a second, she glimpsed water as she fell.

But I wanted to reveal details in a certain order, to enhance tension.

It is perfectly fine to use the word **was** if you want to make it clear something is still happening:

Susana was pulling on her jeans. “You got about thirty seconds.”

How to change passive sentences into active sentences

First, identify passive sentences that you want to change to active.
Use the information outlined above to help identify passive and active sentences.
One of the best ways to identify passive sentences is to read your work aloud!

Let's practice changing passive to active by looking at sentences from our Mystic Springs anthology stories, as well as my suggestions to the authors.

Example 1:

Her breathing was much more normal now.

My suggestion: *She was breathing more normally now.*

Example 2:

Instantly, his mouth was refreshed, and his headache began to clear.

My suggestions: *Instantly, the water refreshed his mouth, and...*

Example 3:

There were empty Gatorade bottles, and a half-full one sitting next to an open laptop.

My suggestion: *Empty Gatorade bottles, one half full, sat next to an open laptop.*

Example 4:

Rông's head cocks.

My suggestion: *Rông cocks his head*

Example 5:

They were ready. A message had been left on the police station's answering machine.

My suggestion: *Now they were ready. Galina had called and left a message on the police station's answering machine.*

Example 6:

Before the woman could continue, and amid the chaos out front, Galina was astounded to hear a knock on the office door. "Shush!" she ordered.

My suggestion: *Before the woman could continue, and amid the chaos out front, a knock came on the office door. "Shush!" Galina ordered.*

Example 7:

Peeking in, he saw the door was blocked with chairs.

My suggestion: *Peeking in, he saw chairs blocking the door.*

Example 8:

When there were no more screams, Yasbecki was deposited on the ramp of the grotto.

My suggestion: *When Yasbecki finally stopped screaming, the water deposited him on the grotto's ramp.*

Example 9:

Ana's focus shifted from each of his eyes.

My suggestion: *Ana shifted her focus from his eyes.*

Example 10:

Basking in the sheer lack of humans was curbed, though, when there was a loud shriek of metal crashing nearby and something scrambling therein.

My suggestion: *The shriek of crashing metal broke the forest's relative calm, followed by scratching sounds.*

Example 11:

An animal trap was nestled against the trunk of a tree, and inside was a cat scrabbling at the wire walls.

My suggestion: *Inside an animal trap nestled against the trunk of a tree, a cat scrabbled at the trap's wire walls.*

Example 12:

He was side-stepping as much as he could to not step anywhere that wasn't already bare soil or rock.

My suggestion: *He side-stepped the living plants, placing his feet only on bare rock or soil.*

Example 13:

Samantha Simpkins wasted no time in flipping on her siren and taking off.

My suggestion: *Samantha Simpkins flipped on her siren and took off.*

Remember, in writing, there are no *absolute* rules.

The standard suggestions for active voice are not appropriate in every single situation.

Use *passive voice* when you need to.

The challenge is... recognizing when it is needed and when it is not.

Or, if you prefer... recognizing when you need it and when you don't.