

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE

THE ACTIVE VOICE

When the subject of a sentence **performs** the action of a verb, the verb is in the *active voice*.

Examples: *Hart Crane wrote The Bridge.*
Jan sewed the curtains.

In the two sentences, the subjects [*Hart Crane / Jan*] do the action.

THE PASSIVE VOICE

When the subject of the verb **receives** the action -- is acted upon -- the verb is in the *passive voice*.

Examples: *The Bridge was written by Hart Crane.*
The curtains were sewn by Jan.

The subjects, *The Bridge* and *The curtains*, do not act; instead, the action is done to them.

CONSTRUCTION OF THE PASSIVE VOICE:

The passive voice is formed by using the **past participle** form of the verb plus the appropriate form of *be* as a helping verb to indicate the tense.

Examples: *My research paper **is finished** on time.* (present tense passive)
*My research paper **was finished** on time.* (past tense passive)
*My research paper **has been finished** for a week.* (present perfect passive)
*My research paper **had been finished** for a week before I handed it in.* (past perfect passive)

WHEN SHOULD WE USE THE ACTIVE VOICE?

Most of the time, writers should use the active voice because it is clearer and more direct than the passive voice.

WHEN SHOULD WE USE THE PASSIVE VOICE?

When a writer wishes to emphasize what happened, and the person or thing acting is unknown or unimportant, the passive voice should be used:

DDT was found in local soil samples.
[The use of the passive emphasizes the finding of DDT, not who found it.]

We were required to submit the essay by Thursday.
[The passive emphasizes what we had to do, not who was requiring it.]

The passive voice also enables the writer to emphasize the receiver [person or thing] of the action:

Darwin's faith in fixed species was destroyed on his five-year trip on the Beagle.
[Emphasis is on the fact that Darwin's faith was destroyed, not on who or what destroyed it.]

The art of the Greek sculptors of the great age is known to us by long familiarity.
[The passive emphasizes the art, not who knows it.]

Please note: Because constructions involving the passive voice can be awkward or wordy, a writer should use the passive voice only when he has a good reason.

