

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE

Active voice

In most English sentences with an action verb, the subject performs the action denoted by the [verb](#).

These examples show that the [subject](#) is *doing* the verb's action.

The man must have eaten five hamburgers.
*The **man** (subject) is doing the **eating** (verb).*

Marilyn mailed the letter.
***Marilyn** (subject) is doing the **mailing** (verb).*

Colorful parrots live in the rainforests.
***Parrots** (subject) are doing the **living** (verb).*

Because the subject does or "acts upon" the verb in such sentences, the sentences are said to be in the **active voice**.

Passive voice

One can change the normal word order of many active sentences (those with a [direct object](#)) so that the subject is no longer *active*, but is, instead, being *acted upon* by the verb - or *passive*.

Note in these examples how the subject-verb relationship has changed.

Five hamburgers must have been eaten by the man.
***Hamburgers** (subject) are being **eaten** (verb).*

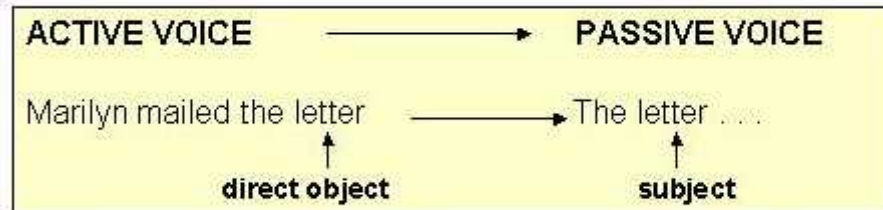
The letter was mailed by Marilyn.
*The **letter** (subject) was being **mailed** (verb).*

Because the subject is being "acted upon" (or is *passive*), such sentences are said to be in the **passive voice**.

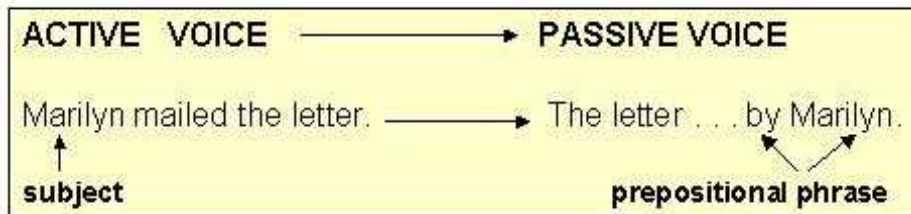
NOTE: *Colorful parrots live in the rainforests* cannot be changed to passive voice because the sentence does not have a direct object.

To change a sentence from active to passive voice, do the following:

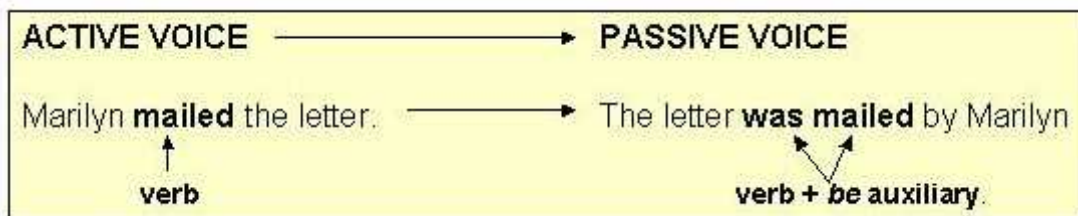
1. Move the active sentence's direct object into the sentence's subject slot



2. Place the active sentence's subject into a phrase beginning with the [preposition](#) *by*



3. Add a form of the [auxiliary verb](#) *be* to the main verb and change the main verb's form



Because passive voice sentences necessarily add words and change the normal **doer-action-receiver of action** direction, they may make the reader work harder to understand the intended meaning.

As the examples below illustrate, a sentence in active voice flows more smoothly and is easier to understand than the same sentence in passive voice.

ACTIVE VOICE

At each concert, the soprano sang at least one tune from a well-known opera.

↑ ↑ ↑
doer of action **action** **receiver of action**

PASSIVE VOICE

At each concert, at least one tune from a well-known opera was sung by the soprano.

↑ ↑ ↑
receiver of action **action** **doer of action**

ACTIVE VOICE

Asbestos abatement teams will remove large chunks of asbestos-laden material from the hallways on the second and third floors.

↑ ↑ ↑
doer of action **action** **receiver of action**

PASSIVE VOICE

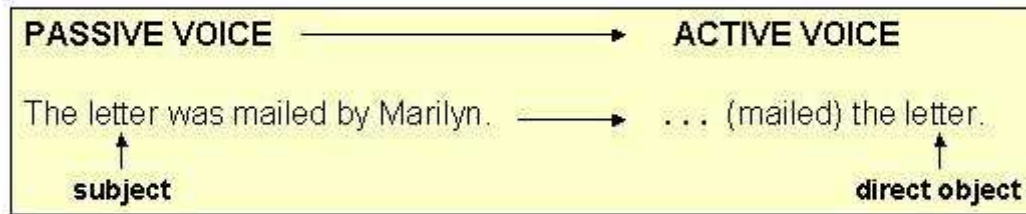
Large chunks of asbestos-laden material will be removed from the hallways on the second and third floors by asbestos abatement teams.

↑ ↑ ↑
receiver of action **action** **doer of action**

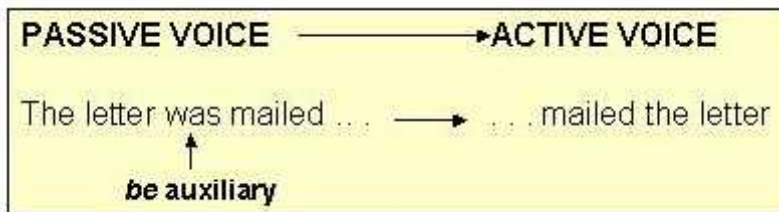
It is generally preferable to use the ACTIVE voice.

To change a passive voice sentence into an active voice sentence, simply reverse the steps shown above.

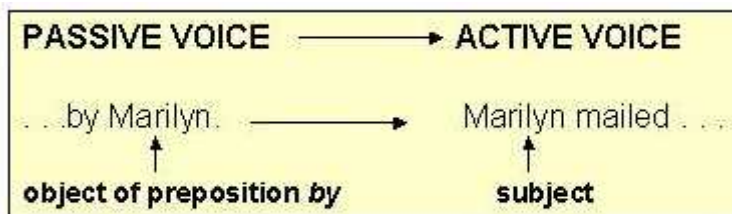
1. Move the passive sentence's subject into the active sentence's direct object slot



2. Remove the auxiliary verb **be** from the main verb and change main verb's form if needed



3. Place the passive sentence's object of the preposition **by** into the subject slot.



Because it is more direct, most writers prefer to use the active voice whenever possible.

The passive voice may be a better choice, however, when

- the doer of the action is unknown, unwanted, or unneeded in the sentence

Examples

<p>The ballots have been counted.</p> <p>Sometimes our efforts are not fully appreciated.</p>

- the writer wishes to emphasize the action of the sentence rather than the doer of the action

Examples

The high-jump record was finally broken last Saturday.

A suspect was questioned for sixteen hours by the police.

- the writer wishes to use passive voice for sentence variety.

Sentences in Active and Passive Voice

- Here are examples of sentences written in both the **active voice** and the **passive voice**, with the active voice sentence appearing first:
- Harry ate six shrimp at dinner. (active)
At dinner, six shrimp were eaten by Harry. (passive)
- Beautiful giraffes roam the savannah. (active)
The savannah is roamed by beautiful giraffes. (passive)
- Sue changed the flat tire. (active)
The flat tire was changed by Sue. (passive)
- We are going to watch a movie tonight. (active)
A movie is going to be watched by us tonight. (passive)
- I ran the obstacle course in record time. (active)
The obstacle course was run by me in record time. (passive)
- The crew paved the entire stretch of highway. (active)
The entire stretch of highway was paved by the crew. (passive)
- Mom read the novel in one day. (active)
The novel was read by Mom in one day. (passive)
- The critic wrote a scathing review. (active)
A scathing review was written by the critic. (passive)
- I will clean the house every Saturday. (active)
The house will be cleaned by me every Saturday. (passive)
- The staff is required to watch a safety video every year. (active)
A safety video will be watched by the staff every year. (passive)
- She faxed her application for a new job. (active)
The application for a new job was faxed by her. (passive)

- Tom painted the entire house. (active)
The entire house was painted by Tom. (passive)
- The teacher always answers the students' questions. (active)
The students' questions are always answered by the teacher. (passive)
- The choir really enjoys that piece. (active)
That piece is really enjoyed by the choir. (passive)
- Who taught you to ski? (active)
By whom were you taught to ski? (passive)
- The forest fire destroyed the whole suburb. (active)
The whole suburb was destroyed by the forest fire. (passive)
- The two kings are signing the treaty. (active)
The treaty is being signed by the two kings. (passive)
- The cleaning crew vacuums and dusts the office every night. (active)
Every night the office is vacuumed and dusted by the cleaning crew. (passive)
- Larry generously donated money to the homeless shelter. (active)
Money was generously donated to the homeless shelter by Larry. (passive)
- No one responded to my sales ad. (active)
My sales ad was not responded to by anyone. (passive)