Active versus Passive Voice


Writing in active voice is the preferred voice to use in academic essays. Sentences written in the active voice are generally clearer than and emphasize action more than those in passive voice.

Voice refers to the relationship between a verb and its subject.

Active voice: when a verb is in the active voice, the subject is generally a person or thing performing an action.

- Active voice emphasizes the subject of the sentence and its action verb.
- The correct way to write in active voice is to make the person or thing the subject of the sentence, followed by a verb that best describes the action.
  Example: The dog chewed the bone.

Passive voice: when a verb is in the passive voice, the subject is the receiver of the action.

- The use of to be (is, was, were) before verbs in formal college papers often results in passive voice.
  Example: The bone was chewed by the dog.
- When the subject becomes a receiver, the preposition “by” also occurs.
- The subject in a passive sentence is the recipient of the action, not the “actor” who performs it.
  Example: The construction of the Dinosaur Museum was completed in 1923. (Construction is the recipient here.)
Depending on the verb tense, the auxiliary verbs “have/has” and “will” may also be present along with the “be” verb.

Passive voice: The Dinosaur Museum has been designed by Gunther Apelhaus.
Active voice: Gunther Apelhaus designed The Dinosaur Museum.

Passive voice: The display will have been designed by me tomorrow.
Active voice: I will have designed the display tomorrow.

In each active sentence, the subject must be clear and provide meaning. To change passive to active, identify to whom or what the pronoun it refers:

Passive voice: It is believed the economy will improve in two years.
Active voice: Experts believe the economy will improve in two years.

More examples:

Passive: I was called in to work early by the boss.
Active: The boss called me to come to work early.

Passive: All of the employees were called in to work early by the boss.
Active: The boss called all of the employees to come to work early.

Passive: The employees are being called in to work early by the boss.
Active: The boss is calling the employees to come to work early.

Passive: The employees have been called in to work early by the boss.
Active: An hour ago, the boss called the employees to come to work early.