

Writing Revision: Fixing Passive Voice

What is Passive Voice?	Why avoid Passive Voice?	Finding Passive Voice: The “by X” Test
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Active voice occurs when the sentence subject performs the action: “<u>John</u> walked the dog.” John is the subject doing something. Passive voice occurs when the sentence subject receives the action: “<u>The dog</u> was walked by John.” The dog is the subject having something done to it. Passive voice is grammatically correct and acceptable to use in certain situations, but can cause issues, especially in academic writing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Passive voice splits the subject and verb, placing them far apart which can confuse a reader. Passive voice requires more words to say less; Active Voice tells you more with fewer words. Academic writing should be clear, but passive voice lacks clarity about who does what. For example: “The dog was walked” is a complete sentence, but doesn’t mention who performed the action of walking the dog (John). 	<p>The “By X” test is the best way to find passive voice:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In passive voice, the “doer” can be stated explicitly or omitted, implying who did the action. Whether the actor is explicitly stated or just implied, placing “by” after the verb always indicates passive voice Ask yourself who performed the action of a sentence, and if you see “by X” or can add “by X” after the action, you have passive voice.

Fixing Passive Voice

Step 1: Use the by X Test	Step 2: Find the Actor	Step 3: Find the Action	Step 4: Bring them together	Step 5: Rebuild the Sentence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask “who is doing the action and who is receiving the action” Use the “by X” to ensure you have passive voice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highlight the actor of the sentence If the actor isn’t explicitly stated, insert one and write it down 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask “what is being done” to find the verb/action Highlight the action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rewrite the sentence with the actor at the start followed by its action This should be a complete, if simple, sentence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Add back any omitted information from the original sentence You now have a sentence in active voice!
<p>Example: The function of the executive branch is examined <u>by this paper</u>.</p>	<p>Example: The function of the executive branch is examined <u>by this paper</u>.</p>	<p>Example: The functions of the executive branch is <u>examined</u> <u>by this paper</u>.</p>	<p>Example: <u>This paper</u> <u>examines</u>.</p>	<p>Example: <u>This paper</u> <u>examines</u> the function of the executive branch.</p>

When should I use passive voice?

- The actor is unknown: “Stonehenge was erected thousands of years ago.” [We don’t know who made them.]
- The actor is irrelevant: “The school expansion will be funded in 2019.” [We are not interested in who is funding it.]
- You want to be vague about who is responsible: “Errors were found.” [Common in bureaucratic writing!]
- You are talking about a general truth: “Rules are made to be broken.” [By whomever, whenever.]
- You are writing in a scientific genre that traditionally relies on passive voice. Passive voice is often preferred in lab reports and scientific research papers, most notably in the Materials and Methods section: “The sodium hydroxide was dissolved in water. This solution was then titrated with acid.”

Try revising the sentences below into passive voice. The actor may not be present for each sentence, so feel free to make one up.

1. At dinner, six shrimp were eaten by Harry.
2. The student's questions were always answered by the teacher.
3. Staff are required to watch a safety video every year.
4. The metal beams were corroded.