

Passive and Active Voice

A professor or graduate instructor has probably cautioned you to eliminate passive voice from your writing at one time or another. That's because passive verbs make your writing boring and confuse your reader. Active verbs, on the other hand, focus attention on actors, bringing clarity and forcefulness to your prose.

Below you'll discover how to:

- Locate and eliminate passive voice
- Avoid common mistakes involving passive voice
- Write in active voice
- Understand why historians write in active voice

Locating the Passive Voice

Before you can eliminate passive voice, you must first learn what it is and how to locate it in your writing.

According to *The Chicago Manual of Style*, "Voice shows whether the subject [of a sentence] acts ... or is acted on ... – that is, whether the subject performs or receives the action of the verb.¹ So, a sentence in which the subject performs the verb's action is in *active* voice, and a sentence in which the subject receives the force or action of the verb is in *passive* voice.

In the following sentences the passive verb is in bold type:

Mistakes **were made** with the passive voice.

The Confederacy **was defeated** in 1865.

In 1885, a major strike against Jay Gould's Southwestern Railroad System **had been won** by the Knights of Labor.

The National Industrial Recovery Act **was declared** unconstitutional in 1935.

Why are these sentences in passive voice?

Let's take a look at the second example, "The Confederacy **was defeated** in 1865." This sentence is passive because its subject, "The Confederacy," receives the action of the *verb phrase*, "was defeated." In this verb phrase, a past tense form of the verb "to be"—in this case "was"—combines with the *past participle* of the verb "to defeat." Past participles often end in "ed" and signal that a verb's action is completed. So, another way to think of this sentence is, "The act of defeating the Confederacy was completed in 1865."

Helpful Hint: Sometimes an author writes in passive voice but signals the actor of a sentence with the preposition "by." For example, "the Confederacy was defeated **by the Union Army** in 1865."

Commons Mistakes

Students often mistakenly identify forms of the verb "to be" with passive voice. The verb "to be" has eight basic forms: is, are, was, were, been, being, be, and am. While a form of "to be" usually appears in passive verb phrases, it does not signify passive voice by itself. The following sentences are **not** in passive voice:

The train **is coming**.

The passenger **was waiting**.

The NIRA **was** unconstitutional.

In the first two examples, the verbal phrase includes a *present* instead of a *past* participle. The present participle (ending in “ing”) stresses the ongoing or continuous nature of an action. Rather than suggesting that the train receives the force of the verbal phrase, “is coming,” the first sentence tells us that the action of the verb is continuing. The train is in the state of coming; it is still on its way. The second sentence follows the same pattern but uses a past tense form of the verb “to be.” It tells us that the passenger continued to wait in the past. In the third sentence, “was” acts like an equal sign in the sentence: NIRA = unconstitutional. Acting here as a linking verb, “was” tells us that the NIRA existed continually in a state of unconstitutionality.

Locating Active Voice

Let’s rewrite our original sentences, putting them in active voice.

Students **made** mistakes with the passive voice.

The Union Army **defeated** the Confederacy in 1865.

In 1885, the Knights of Labor **won** a major strike against Jay Gould’s Southwestern Railroad System.

The Supreme Court **declared** the National Industrial Recovery Act unconstitutional in 1935.

Why are these sentences in *active voice*?

In the first sentence, the subject, “students,” performs the action of the verb, “made,” producing “mistakes.” Similarly, the Union Army acted upon the South, the Knights acted upon the Southwestern Railroad, and the Supreme Court acted upon the NIRA.

Why do Historians Write in Active Voice?

Historians stress active voice because it tells them about actors. One of the most challenging parts of writing history is determining who or what was responsible for a particular action, event, or idea. It is impossible to make a persuasive argument about the past unless we also know who participated in the making of that past. For example, take the passive sentence, “The slaves were freed.” Who did the “freeing”? Was it Lincoln in his 1863 Emancipation Proclamation? Was it the Union Army as it marched through the South? Was it the actions of slaves themselves? Or did emancipation result from a combination of these and other factors? If so, did the actors share the same definition of the “freedom” they were in the process of creating? We cannot hope to answer these or other important historical questions unless we have a clear understanding of the actors involved.

¹ *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th ed., 235.