

Passive Voice

Voice is a grammatical term that "pertains to who or what serves as the *subject* in a clause"¹.
 Read the example below:

Subject verb object
The politician kissed the baby.

The predominant word order pattern in English is SUBJECT-VERB-OBJECT (SVO)

There are two main "voices" in English: **active voice** and **passive voice**.

The sentence "The politician kissed the baby" is in active voice, because "the politician" begins the sentence and does the action. The "do-er" of the action is called the **agent**.

Passive voice occurs when the *object*, not the *subject*, is the agent:

subject verb object and agent
The baby was kissed by the politician

Forming Passive Voice

To form the passive voice, use the following equation:

be verb (is/are/was/were) + the past participle form of the main verb.

Type of Passive Voice	Example
passive voice (PV) + simple present	Paper is made in Tacoma
PV + present perfect*	Paper has been made in Tacoma
PV + present progressive*	Paper is being made in Tacoma
PV + simple past	This paper was made in Tacoma
PV + past progressive*	Paper was being made in Tacoma
PV + future modality	Paper will be made in Tacoma
PV + modals	Paper can be made in Tacoma

**less common in academic writing*

¹ Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 343

Uses of Passive Voice

Below are two common reasons to use passive voice:

1) To describe an action for which the agent (or "do-er" of the action) is unknown:

*That Bank **was robbed** last week.*

2) When the agent is known but is NOT the topic of focus:

*"For Whom the Bell Tolls" is a novel set amidst the Spanish Civil War. It **was written** by Ernest Hemingway.*

In the example above, the novel--not Hemingway--is the writer's topic. So, the writer uses passive voice to keep the novel ("it") as the subject.

Passive Voice in Academic Discourse

Academic writers often use passive voice to distance themselves from an action or result out of concern for academic discourse conventions (especially in science):

Study participants were shown three images. Next, participants were prompted to describe their feelings about each image.

Passive voice is common in formal academic discourse because the preference for avoiding first and second person pronouns (*I*, *we*) prevents writers from being the agents of their own actions:

***We** showed the participants three images.----> The participants **were shown** three images.*

Verbs Frequently Used with Passive Voice in Academic Writing

make	see	find	consider
give	use	do	show

Common Passive Voice Mistakes

Passive voice works only with **transitive verbs**, which are verbs that must link to an object (e.g. give: *She gave the book to a student.* English speakers would likely not say only "*She gave.*")

Intransitive verbs, such as *happen* and *occur*, cannot take objects, and therefore cannot be used in passive voice:

This problem ~~was~~ happened in my country.

The change in climate ~~was~~ occurred in coastal areas.