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.

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Passive Voice</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>passive voice (PV) + simple present</td>
<td>Paper <em>is made</em> in Tacoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PV + present perfect*</td>
<td>Paper <em>has been made</em> in Tacoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PV + present progressive*</td>
<td>Paper <em>is being made</em> in Tacoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PV + simple past</td>
<td>This paper <em>was made</em> in Tacoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PV + past progressive*</td>
<td>Paper was <em>being made</em> in Tacoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PV + future modality</td>
<td>Paper <em>will be made</em> in Tacoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PV + modals</td>
<td>Paper <em>can be made</em> in Tacoma</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*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.*