

Name:

Period:

Date:

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# Active vs. Passive Sentence Construction

1. The brilliant essay **was written** by John.
2. John **wrote** the brilliant essay.

John is the person who wrote the essay, so he is *the agent* in both of these sentences. Sentence #1 is *passive* because the agent is "disguised" as the *object of a preposition*, and the *receiver of the action* occupies the *subject* slot. Sentence #2 is *active* because the *agent* is also the *grammatical subject* of this sentence (Subject-Verb-Object). Notice the *active sentence* is shorter and more direct than the *passive sentence*.

1. A book can **be read** where Caesar **is killed** by Brutus.
2. You can **read** how Brutus **kills** Caesar.

Advantages of using active voice sentence structure in expository essays:

- ∅ clearly defined agent
- ∅ action verb creates immediacy
- ∅ strong declarative structure

Passive sentence structure is sometimes used when the agent is unknown, or in business and social settings to avoid the appearance of blame or unfair accusation, or to emphasize the receiver of the action. Occasionally, in all fairness, there may be a time and a place for passive construction, but it usually has no place in thesis-driven expository essays such as those written for English, history, and humanities courses.

## A Tip

Revising passive sentences requires you to be able to find the subject, the verb, and the object within the sentence and place them in a standard subject-verb-object order. You can find these parts of the sentence by talking to the sentence. Yes, you can talk to a sentence! If you ask your sentences the proper questions, they will give you the proper answers. Consider the following sentence:

**The ice cream truck was chased by both adults and children.**

To find the subject of a sentence, find the verb. (Some form of the verb "to be" precedes the active verb, typically "is," "are," "was," "were," "be," or "been.")

Ask "Who or What + verb?" The answer is the subject. (You may want to ask "Who or What did the [verb]ing?" to make it even clearer for yourself.)

Who or What chased? (*Who or what did the chasing?*)

Answer...Both adults & children

**"Both adults & children" is the subject.**

To find the object of a verb, Ask [insert the subject] + verb + *Whom or What?*

Both adults & children chased *Whom or What?*

Answer...Chased the ice cream truck

**"ice cream truck" is the object.**

Knowing the parts of the sentence, we can now revise the passive sentence to read:

**Both adults and children chased the ice cream truck.**

**EXERCISES: Revise these passive sentences to make them active.**

1. The computer class was attended by many students.
2. A good time was had by all.
3. Oxygen is needed by fire to burn.
4. The issues were clouded and the listeners inflamed by the irate speakers.
5. These cars are produced in Italy.
6. Silence is required by some to sleep.
7. Halloween ghosts are believed in by frightened children.
8. Many types of bowing and scales must be mastered by successful violinists.
9. The call to arms was responded to eagerly by many who were motivated by a thirst for liberty.
10. The fact that the town was obliterated by the hurricane was bad enough, but it was also further victimized by looters.

**Now, create two pairs of active and revised passive sentence examples.**

Passive Sentence:

Active Sentence:

Passive Sentence:

Active Sentence: