## Voice (Grammar)

Voice is the term used to describe whether a [verb](https://www.grammar-monster.com/lessons/verbs.htm) is active or passive.

In other words, when the [subject](https://www.grammar-monster.com/glossary/subject.htm) of the verb is doing the action of the verb (e.g., "The dog bit the postman."), the verb is said to be in the [active voice](https://www.grammar-monster.com/glossary/active_voice.htm). When the subject of the verb is being acted upon (e.g., "The postman was bitten."), the verb is said to be in the [passive voice](https://www.grammar-monster.com/glossary/passive_voice.htm). So, the voice of a verb tells us whether the subject is acting or being acted upon.

## What Is the Active Voice?

If the subject is performing the action, then the verb is said to be in the [active voice](https://www.grammar-monster.com/glossary/active_voice.htm). Look at this:

## What Is the Passive Voice?

If the subject is having the action done to it, then the verb is said to be in the [passive voice](https://www.grammar-monster.com/glossary/passive_voice.htm). Look at this:

## Easy Examples of Voice

Here are some more examples of verbs (shown in bold) in the active voice.

* Lee **ate** the pies.

(*Lee* is the subject of the verb. The subject is doing the action of the verb.)

* We **play** hopscotch.

(*We* is the subject of the verb. The subject is doing the action of the verb.)

* The sharks **will attack** the cage.

(*The sharks* is the subject of the verb. The subject is doing the action of the verb.)

Here are some more examples of verbs in the passive voice.

* The pies **were eaten** by Lee.

(*The pies* is the subject of the verb. The subject is being acted upon.)

* Hopscotch **is played** by us.

(*Hopscotch* is the subject of the verb. The subject is being acted upon.)

* The cage **will be attacked** by the sharks.

(*The cage* is the subject of the verb. The subject is being acted upon.)

## Real-Life Examples of Voice

In the examples above, the actions of the verbs (*to eat*, *to play*, *to attack*) are obvious physical activities. Remember though that not all verbs describe such obvious activities. This is particularly true for verbs in the active voice. The verbs in these four examples are all in the active voice.

* Dogs **sniff** good smells with their left nostril.
* I **know** I **have** the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I **have** the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too. (Queen Elizabeth I)
* The voice of Mickey Mouse and the voice of Minnie Mouse **became** husband and wife in real life.
* Only a quarter of the Sahara Desert **is** sandy.

Here are some verbs in the passive voice with less obvious actions.

* At one time, Melbourne **was known** as Batmania.
* Philosophy **was considered** science once. (Satirist PJ O'Rourke)

Only a verb that acts on something else (called a [transitive verb](https://www.grammar-monster.com/glossary/transitive_verbs.htm)) can be written in the passive voice.

* More people **are killed** taking selfies than in shark attacks.

(*To kill* is a transitive verb; i.e., you kill something.)

* That tiny pocket in jeans **was designed** to store pocket watches.

(*To design* is a transitive verb; i.e., you design something.)

* Avocados **were named** after the Nahuatl word for testicles.

(*To name* is a transitive verb; i.e., you name something.)

If a verb is [intransitive](https://www.grammar-monster.com/glossary/intransitive_verbs.htm) (i.e., it does not act on something else), it will always be in the active voice.

* Being English, I always **laugh** at anything about the lavatory or bottoms. (Actress Elizabeth Hurley)

(*To laugh* is an intransitive verb. You can't laugh a dog, for example.)

* Anybody who **smiles** automatically **looks** better. (Actress Diane Lane)

(*To smile* and *to look* are intransitive verbs. You can't smile a dog or look a dog, for example.)

* Our noses and ears **grow** throughout our lives.

(Here, *to grow* is an intransitive verb.)

Other common intransitive verbs are *to cry*, *to die*, *to disappear*, and *to wait*. Remember that these cannot be used in the passive voice. As intransitive verbs don't act on something (i.e., have no objects), there is nothing to become the subject of a verb in the passive voice.

It gets a little bit more complicated because some verbs, like *to grow*, can be intransitive or transitive.

* I **grew** tomatoes.

(Here, *to grow* is transitive. That means we can make it passive.)

* Tomatoes **were grown** by me.

(This is the passive version.)

* The beanstalk **grew** quickly.

(Here, *to grow* means *to get bigger*. In this meaning, it is intransitive. That means we can't make it passive. *The beanstalk was got bigger quickly.* That's nonsense.)

Read more about [transitive verbs](https://www.grammar-monster.com/glossary/transitive_verbs.htm) and [intransitive verbs](https://www.grammar-monster.com/glossary/intransitive_verbs.htm).

Here's something else to look out for. It is extremely common for verbs in the active voice and the passive voice to be used after words like *can*, *cannot*, *may*, *might*, *must*, and *should* (called [modal auxiliary verbs](https://www.grammar-monster.com/glossary/auxiliary_verbs.htm)).

* He who **is** to be a good ruler **must have been ruled**. (Philosopher Aristotle)

(*Is* is in the active voice. *Have been ruled*, which follows the modal *must*, is in the passive voice.)

* Canadians say "sorry" so much that The Apology Act **was passed** in 2009, declaring that an apology cannot **be used** as evidence of admission of guilt.

(*Was passed* is in the passive voice. *Be used*, which follows the modal *cannot*, is also in the passive voice.)

It is common for verbs in the active voice and passive voice to appear in the same sentence.

* Theodore Roosevelt **owned** a pet hyena, which **was given** to him by an Ethiopian emperor.

(*Owned* is in the active voice. *Was given* is in the passive voice.)

* My music **was considered** uncool, but I always **felt** a connection with the audience. (Singer David Cassidy)

(*Was considered* is in the passive voice. *Felt* is in the active voice.)

* The scary thing **is** that in my lifetime, 95 per cent of the world's rhinos **have been killed**.

(*Is* is in the active voice. *Have been killed* is in the passive voice.)

## Why Should I Care about Voice?

There are four good reasons to care about grammatical voice.

## (Reason 1) The active voice offers some great benefits.

Writers tend to opt for the active voice over the passive voice for the following reasons:

* (Reason 1) The active voice is more succinct.
* (Reason 2) The active voice is more direct.
* (Reason 3) The active voice is more informative.
* (Reason 4) The active voice is more authoritative.
* (Reason 5) The active voice is more engaging.

(NB: Each of these benefits is explained in more detail on the [active sentences](https://www.grammar-monster.com/glossary/active_sentences.htm) page.)

## (Reason 2) The passive voice offers some great benefits.

Here are four benefits of the passive voice.

* (Reason 1) The passive voice can be used to avoid blame.
* (Reason 2) The passive voice shows a neutral or objective tone.
* (Reason 3) The passive voice is often appropriate when the doer of the verb is obvious, unimportant or unknown.
* (Reason 4) The passive voice allows you to focus on what's important by bringing it to the front of your sentence.

(NB: Each of these benefits is explained in more detail on the [passive sentences](https://www.grammar-monster.com/glossary/passive_sentences.htm) page.)

## (Reason 3) Use both the active and passive voice, as required.

Even though the passive voice has its benefits, the bias for the active voice is so strong that proofreaders (real people) and grammar checkers (computer programs) will often try "to correct" a passive construction to an active one.

Have the confidence to ignore your grammar checker. Use the active voice and the passive voice, as required, to control the flow of text and to stress the most important parts of your sentences. Look at these sentences written in active voice:

* King John signed the *Magna Carta* in 1215. He placed limits on his powers and proclaimed certain liberties.

Now compare the mixed sentences telling the same information:

* In 1215, the *Magna Carta* was signed by King John. He placed limits on his powers and proclaimed certain liberties.

There are two important things happening in our second example. First, we've made the *Magna Carta* the subject of the sentence to highlight what we're talking about. Second, we've ended our sentence with *King John*. As the first word of the second sentence is *He*, our text now flows smoothly.

## (Reason 4) Are you even dealing with the passive voice?

It's not uncommon for proofreaders and grammar checkers to identify something as passive voice that is, in fact, active voice.

Proofreaders and grammar checkers look for passive-voice constructions by finding a form of the verb "to be" (e.g., *am*, *are*, *is*, *was*, *were*, *has been*, *have been*, *had been*, *will be*, *will have been*, *being*, *be*) followed by a [past participle](https://www.grammar-monster.com/glossary/past_participles.htm) (i.e., the form of the verb that typically ends in -*ed* or -*en*). Most of the time, this system works.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Form of the verb to be** | **Past participle** | **Passive voice** |
| am | licensed | I **am licensed** to kill. |
| was | developed | It **was developed** last year. |
| has been | seen | He **has been seen** in France. |
| will have been | eaten | It **will have been eaten** by then. |

Remember that modals like *can*, *cannot*, *could*, *might*, and *should* can also feature.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Modal** | **Form of the verb to be** | **Past Participle** | **Passive voice** |
| cannot | be | licensed | I **cannot be licensed** to kill. |
| might | be | developed | It **might be developed** last year. |
| should | have been | seen | He **should have been seen** in France. |
| could | have been | eaten | It **could have been eaten** by then. |

However, some constructions that look like the passive voice aren't. Here's an example:

* I always wanted to be somebody, but now I realize I **should have been** more specific. (Actress Lily Tomlin)

(There is no past participle after *have been*.)

Here's an example of something that looks a lot like passive voice but isn't:

* All the mistakes I have ever made in my life have been when I **have been** drunk. (Artist Tracy Emin)

(There is no past participle after *have been*. Here, *drunk* is an adjective and not part of the verb, even though *drunk* is the past participle of *to drink*. Confused? Think of it like this: the subject of the verb (*I*) is not being acted upon.)

This is passive voice:

* I **have been drunk** under the table by Russian sailors.

(Here, the subject of the verb (*I*) is being acted upon. "*The Russian sailors drank me under the table*" is an active-voice version.)

Here's another example of something that looks a lot like passive voice but isn't:

* Europeans **were** scared of eating tomatoes when they **were introduced**.

(*Were* is in the active voice. *Were introduced* is in the passive voice. Here, *were scared* looks like it's in the passive voice, especially because *scared* is the past participle of *to scare*. However, *scared* is not part of the verb in this example. It's an adjective meaning afraid.)

So, it's quite understandable why some proofreaders and grammar checkers confuse the passive voice with an active-voice sentence that features the verb "to be" in one of its forms. Here's a pretty good trick to avoid that mistake, and it's fun.

If you can include the term "by zombies" after your verb and it still makes sense, then you're dealing with the passive voice. (Thanks to Dean of Academics and Deputy Director Rebecca Johnson for this tip.)

* The car could have been stolen…by zombies.

(This makes sense. Therefore, *have been stolen* is in the passive voice.)

* The car could have been illicit…by zombies.

(This makes no sense. Therefore, *have been illicit* is in the active voice.)

As a native English speaker, you're probably already great at deciding between active and passive voice. You are pretty safe to let your instinct guide you, but, as a general rule, you should try to use the active voice unless you specifically want one of the benefits offered by the passive voice.

Here's a great example of a proofreader trying way too hard to avoid the passive voice:

* When the author of Diabetes for Dummies (Dr Alan Rubin) wrote "The patient was comatose and **was given** thyroid hormone," his editors changed it to "The patient was comatose and took thyroid hormone." In response to this edit, Rubin said: "These are extremely sick patients. They can't take care of themselves. They have to be passive whether Wiley [style guide] likes it or not."

(Better a passive sentence than an inappropriate one.)