



## Passive and Active Voice

### Vocabulary to Know

Subject = the noun that does or is something in a sentence

Verb = an action

Agent = the person or thing responsible for something in a sentence

### Passive Voice

In a sentence using passive voice, the **verb** is done to the **subject** of the sentence. However, the **agent**—the person or thing doing the verb in the sentence—may not be evident:

**The survivors** were **chased** into the street.  
Subject                      Verb

In the case of this sentence, your reader won't know who is doing the chasing, and even if you let your reader know who is doing the chasing, the sentence is still wordy and awkward:

The survivors were chased into the street by zombies.

If you can add the phrase **by zombies** to the end of the sentence, you know you've written a sentence in passive voice:

The straggler was bitten by zombies.  
The cookies were stolen by zombies.  
The taxes were filed by zombies.

### When to use passive voice

There are two instances in which passive voice is more effective than active voice:

1. If we don't know who the **agent** is:  
The zombies were reanimated.

In the example above (1) we do not know who reanimated the zombies. We only know that reanimation was done to the zombies. Therefore, we can use passive voice.

2. If the **agent** is not important:  
The zombie vaccine will be distributed this year.

In the example above (2) readers may be more concerned with the fact that **the zombie vaccine will be distributed** than they are with **who is going to distribute it**; therefore, passive voice is acceptable.

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## Active Voice

In a sentence using active voice, the **subject** of the sentence performs the action expressed by the **verb**, and is therefore the **agent**:

The **zombies chased** the survivors into the street.  
(Subject) (Verb)

Furthermore, active voice very often **uses fewer words** to express the same idea, which saves you and your reader time and brain cells:

The zombies stole the cookies.  
The zombies filed their taxes.

## When to use active voice

Use active voice the majority of the time. This will keep your sentences from becoming too complicated or wordy, and above all, let your reader know who is responsible for the action in the sentence.

## How to write in active voice

Choosing active or passive voice isn't difficult if you think about **who is responsible for the action** in a sentence, and how you want your reader to visualize that action.

1. Turn the sentence around and add an **agent** and a **verb** at the beginning:

The survivors were chased into the street.  
\*becomes\*

**Zombies chased** the survivors into the street.  
(Subject) (Verb)

2. Eliminate the helping verb **be** (or any of its tenses):

The Zombie vaccine will be distributed this year.  
\*becomes\*

The CDC will distribute the zombie vaccine this year.

3. Consider whether it will help your reader to know **who is responsible for the action**:

The zombies were reanimated.  
\*becomes\*

The mad scientist reanimated the zombies.

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