

## Using the active voice

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### Use the active voice unless you have a good reason for choosing the passive.

In the active voice, the subject does the action; in the passive voice, the subject receives the action. Although both voices are grammatically correct, the active voice is usually more effective because it is simpler and more direct.

**ACTIVE** Hernando *caught* the fly ball.

**PASSIVE** The fly ball *was caught* by Hernando.

In passive sentences, the actor (in this case Hernando) frequently disappears from the sentence: *The fly ball was caught.*

In most cases, you will want to emphasize the actor, so you should use the active voice. To replace a passive verb with an active alternative, make the actor the subject of the sentence.

*A bolt of lightning struck the transformer.*  
▶ ~~The transformer was struck by a bolt of lightning.~~  
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The active verb (*struck*) makes the point more forcefully than the passive verb (*was struck*).

*The settlers stripped the land of timber before realizing*  
▶ ~~The land was stripped of timber before the settlers realized~~  
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the consequences of their actions.

The revision emphasizes the actors (*settlers*) by naming them in the subject.

*We did not take down the*  
▶ ~~The holiday decorations were not taken down until~~  
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Valentine's Day.

Often the actor does not appear in a passive-voice sentence. To turn such a sentence into the active voice, the writer must decide on an appropriate subject, in this case *We*.

The passive voice is appropriate if you wish to emphasize the receiver of the action or to minimize the importance of the actor.

**APPROPRIATE** Many native Hawaiians *are forced* to leave  
**PASSIVE** their beautiful beaches to make room for  
hotels and condominiums.

**APPROPRIATE** As the time for harvest approaches, the tobacco  
**PASSIVE** plants *are sprayed* with a chemical to retard  
the growth of suckers.

The writer of the first sentence wished to emphasize the receiver of the action, *Hawaiians*. The writer of the second sentence wished to focus on the tobacco plants, not on the people spraying them.

In much scientific writing, the passive voice properly emphasizes the experiment or process being described, not the researcher.

**APPROPRIATE** The solution *was heated* to the boiling point,  
**PASSIVE** and then it *was reduced* in volume by 50  
percent.