



Verbs in Active vs. Passive Voice

According to the Holt Handbook Sixth Edition, voice is the form a verb takes indicating whether its subject acts or is acted upon.

Active:

When a verb is in active voice its subject acts or does something. In the following examples, the subjects are underlined and the verbs are in bold. Notice that the subjects are acting out the verbs.

- We are **building** a house for a family of four.
- I **did not make** that call.
- The dog **bit** our mail carrier.
- He **has fixed** our computer twice already.

Passive:

When a verb is in passive voice its subject receives the action or is acted upon. The passive form is often indicated by helping verbs (is, am, are, were, was, been) used with another verb. The word "by" is another clue to identifying the passive form. In the following examples, the subjects are underlined and the verbs are in bold.

- The house **is being built** for a family of four.
- That call **was not made** by me.
- Our mail carrier **was bit** by the dog.
- My computer **has been fixed** twice already.

Changing from Passive to Active voice:

To change a verb from passive to active voice, make the subject of the passive verb the object of the active verb. The person or thing performing the action then becomes the subject of the new sentence. The verbs in the following examples are underlined. Notice the change from the passive form of the verb to the active form (HH page 530-31).

EXAMPLE:

passive: The novel *Frankenstein* was written by Mary Shelley.

active: Mary Shelley wrote the novel *Frankenstein*.

*All information on this handout came from 6th ed. The Holt Handbook and/or the 4th ed. Brief Handbook. If you distribute this handout, please note that it came from the University of South Carolina Aiken Writing Room. For more information, please see the 4th ed. Brief Holt Handbook chapter 16, page 295-296 and chapter 18, page 316. You can also visit <http://kirsznermandell.wadsworth.com> for additional help

If a passive verb does not have an object, you have to supply one that will become the subject of the active verb.

EXAMPLE:

passive: Baby elephants are taught to avoid humans. (By whom are baby elephants taught?)

active: Adult elephants teach baby elephants to avoid humans.

Changing from Active to Passive voice:

To change a verb from active to passive voice, make the object of the active verb the subject of the passive verb. This makes the subject of the active verb become the object of the passive verb. The verbs in the following examples are underlined. Notice the change from the active form of the verb to the passive (HH 531-32).

EXAMPLE:

active: Sir James Murray compiled *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

passive: *The Oxford English Dictionary* was compiled by Sir James Murray.

** Remember that an active verb cannot be put into passive voice without an object. **