

Passive Voice

Marked as “Pass”

In grammar, **voice indicates the relation of the subject to the action of the verb.** When the verb is in active voice, the subject acts; when the verb is in passive voice, the subject is acted upon with no obvious subject doing the action (BWH, 661). In business writing, passive voice often raises questions, rather than answers them, and can make sentences wordy and awkward.

Identifying Passive Voice

One way to identify passive voice is to look for a “to be” verb (is, are, was, were, be, been) followed by a past participle (*hint: looks like a past tense verb*).

Please note: Not all “to be” verbs or past tense verbs are passive. If you must ask the question “*by whom or by what?*” to clarify who is doing the action, you have a passive construction. However, *have and had* are generally not indicators of passive voice.

Fixing Passive Voice

To fix passive voice, determine who or what is doing the action and make that word the subject of the verb, or change the verb of the sentence to an action the subject can do.

Examples of Passive Voice

The following sentences demonstrate passive voice constructions and their corrections:

Passive: *I was sent to the human resources conference.* [Who did the sending?]

Active: My company sent me to the human resources conference.

Passive: *I was sent the accounting report.* [The sender is not important, but this sentence is awkward.]

Active: I received the accounting report.

Passive: *Both of these changes will not be received positively by Keller.*
[The passive is wordy and awkward.]

Active: Keller will not receive these changes positively.

Passive: *The following recommendations are being proposed in this report: X, Y.*
[The writer uses 11 words.]

Active: This report proposes the following recommendations: X, Y.
[Only 8 words are necessary.]

For more information on Passive Voice, see pp. 575-578 of the *Business Writer’s Handbook*.