



Active vs. Passive Voice

- The usual order of words in English sentences is subject-verb-object (S-V-O). Sentences which follow this standard order are said to be in active voice, which means that attention is called to the subject and what he/she/it is doing: *Peter broke Elsa's vase.*
(S) (V) (O)
- In an **active sentence**, the subject does the action indicated: *Peter (S) broke (V) Elsa's vase (O).*
- In a **passive sentence** this word order is reversed so that the person doing the action (*Peter*) comes at the end of the sentence and the object receiving the action (*Elsa's vase*) comes first: *Elsa's vase **was broken by** Peter.*
- This order takes the emphasis off of Peter and onto Elsa's vase – which is probably the way Peter wants it! The difference in order and emphasis is called *voice*.
- **Voice** shows whether the subject performs or receives the action named by the verb.
- When the subject performs the action, the verb is in the **active voice**. When the subject receives the action, the verb is in the **passive voice**. Consider a few more examples:

Active Voice

Marie sang the anthem.

The subject *Marie* does the action.

Congress passed the bill.

The manager closed the restaurant at nine.

Passive Voice

The anthem was sung by Marie.

The subject *anthem* does not do the action.

The bill was passed by Congress.

The restaurant was closed at nine by the manager.

- Note that the structure in a passive sentence has three parts:
 - ◊ A **form of the verb be** (*am, is, are, was, were, be, been*) and
 - ◊ A **past participle**, as in: *is thrown, are thrown, had been thrown, was thrown.*
 - ◊ **By** someone or something (although this may be omitted)
- Academic writing encourages the use of the active voice for more lively and accurate writing, while the passive voice can be useful if no one wants the credit (or blame) for an action. Compare:

ACTIVE: *The committee reached a decision, and the President signed the bill.*

PASSIVE: *A decision was reached (by the committee), and the bill was signed (by the President).*

- In some cases, the agent is omitted entirely: *Mistakes were made. Dishes got broken. Penalties were given.* In these examples no one takes responsibility for anything. A more honest and accurate version might be: *The evening cleaning crew made mistakes loading the dishwasher, resulting in broken dishes and penalties for the crew.*