

Aggie Grammar Guide: Passive Voice Formation

When constructing sentences, remember that word order is important, and variations on placement of doers and receivers of actions can alter meaning. Using passive versus active voice can significantly change the meaning, intent, and emphasis of your sentence, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. Generally, only sentences containing *transitive* verbs can be made passive, as the passive construction requires the movement of an object. Some other restrictions on passivizing exist (for example, *inseparable transitive* verbs), and you should consult a more complete reference to see a detailed discussion of these restrictions. For a review on when to use passive vs. active, refer to the chapter *Passive vs. Active Voice (Style)*.

Formation of Active vs. Passive Voice

In the active voice, the doer of the action occurs in the subject position. For example, in the sentence “They designed the hybrid car,” the subject/doer is “they,” the verb/action is “designed,” and the object/receiver is “the hybrid car.”

In the passive voice, the receiver of the action occurs in the subject position, and the doer moves to a sometimes optional **by**-phrase (e.g., by the professor) in the object position. While not necessary to be grammatically correct, you can include the **by**-phrase containing the doer to clarify meaning. For example, in the sentence “The hybrid car was designed (by them),” the subject/receiver is “the hybrid car,” the verb/action is “was designed,” and the object/doer is “(by them).”

Also note that the verb form changes when moving from active to passive. Make sure your new passive verb agrees in number with the new subject and your subject pronoun (if you use one) changes to an object pronoun. Generally, the *perfect continuous* and the *future continuous* forms are not used in passive voice, so they won’t be illustrated here. Besides **to-be**, other passive forms exist; however, these forms are less commonly used. Refer to a more complete reference for a comprehensive overview of passive formations. Here are some formulas you can use to form the passive:

Present Passive

simple (am/is/are + past participle)

- **Active:** Elders in the Inupiat community **tell** stories because other members of the community **see** them as most wise.
- **Passive:** Stories **are told** by the elders in the Inupiat community because they **are seen** (by the community) as most wise.

perfect (has/have + been + past participle)

- Active: Different countries **have shared** similar foods, ingredients and even special occasions.
- Passive: Similar foods, ingredients and even special occasions **have been shared** (by different countries).

continuous (am/is/are + being + past participle)

- Active: Scientists **are doing** continuous research to improve the set process as well as understand genes.
- Passive: Continuous research **is being done** (by scientists) to improve the set process as well as understand genes.

Past Passive

simple (was/were + past participle)

- Active: My professor **appreciated** my question.
- Passive: My question **was appreciated** (by the professor).

perfect (had + been + past participle)

- Active: Last quarter, the professor **had mentioned** the outbreak of measles in the late '80s or '90s.
- Passive: The outbreak of measles in the late '80s or '90s **had been mentioned** by my professor last quarter.

continuous (was/were + being + past participle)

- Active: Scientists **were doing** research on babies to understand their way of learning.
- Passive: Much research **was being done** (by scientists) on babies to understand their way of learning.

Future Passive

simple (will + be + past participle)

- Active: Officials **will not allow** schoolchildren to go to school.
- Passive: Schoolchildren **will not be allowed** (by officials) to go to school.

perfect (will + have + been + past participle)

- Active: My friends **will have agreed** upon my idea before we meet next week.
- Passive: My idea **will have been agreed** upon (by my friends) before we meet next week.

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Intermediate Practice

For each sentence, first determine if it is active or passive and write your answer. Second, revise each sentence to change active voice to passive voice and passive voice to active voice. Remember, if a passive sentence does not have a doer, you will have to include one when forming the active.

There may be multiple correct ways to revise each sentence, although you will see only one option after you submit each response. Optional "by" phrases appear in parentheses in the possible revisions. Make sure your answer has the same verb form and tense as the suggested answer.

*Example: My professor **appreciated** my question.*

Answer: Active

*Example: My professor **appreciated** my question.*

*Passive Revision: My question **was appreciated** by my professor.*

- 1) The reasons **are stated** by Humboldt State University.
- 2) In 1983, a century after the invention of the telephone, mobile telephones **were developed** by two AT&T Labs researchers, Richard H. Frenkiel and Joel S. Engel.
- 3) The physical problems that **are caused** by the beach cruiser are problems that happen with all types of bikes.
- 4) The teachers **required** her to speak English all the time.
- 5) Apple, Samsung, and Nokia **are known** by almost every individual as three well-known companies in the smartphone market.
- 6) People **consider** having corn in their diet a blessing because of the values it has.
- 7) The Wright brothers **invented** the first airplanes.
- 8) More recently, people **have used** mobile phones to send a text message.

- 9) The college student **will be forced** to practice the language.
- 10) Studying abroad **has been considered** by many college students.

Advanced Practice

For each set of grammatically correct active and passive sentences, first write which sentence is stylistically more effective from the choices, and second, explain your choice in complete.

Please note, there may be multiple ways to write your explanation. Compare your explanation to the one provided in the answer key and determine if one is more effective.

Example:

- **Passive:** *Much research was being done on babies to understand their way of learning.*
- **Active:** *Scientists were doing much research on babies to understand their way of learning.*

Explain why your choice is more effective

AGG Response: Passive is preferred.

The passive is preferred as the sentence emphasizes the research, rather than any doer of the research. Using the active and inserting a doer narrows the scope of the action considerably and may exclude others who could conduct this research (for example, educators). Furthermore, the passive voice is often a convention used in scientific writing.

- 1) Passive: In the 1890s, lower crossbars **were designed** to make women feel more comfortable and safer on bicycles.
Active: In the 1890s, bicycle builders **designed** lower crossbars to make women feel more comfortable and safer on bicycles.
- 2) Passive: To respond to the questions that **were asked** by students, Hadfield recorded experiments in space and posted the recordings on YouTube.
Active (a): To respond to students' questions, Hadfield recorded experiments in space and posted the recordings on YouTube.
Active (b): The students **asked** questions to which Hadfield responded by recording experiments in space and posting the recordings on YouTube.

- 3) Passive: If the problem **is** not **solved**, the Winter Olympics will pay the consequences.
Active: If someone **does** not **solve** the problem, the Winter Olympics will pay the consequences.
- 4) Passive: The author defines this action as a "legitimizing myth," which **is talked** about in the beginning paragraphs of the article.
Active (a): The author defines this action as a "legitimizing myth," which the author **talks** about in the beginning paragraphs of the article.
Active (b): The author **defines** this action as a "legitimizing myth" in the beginning paragraphs of the article.

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Answer Key

Intermediate Practice

- 1) Original is passive. Active: Humboldt State University **stated** the reasons.
- 2) Original is passive. Active: In 1983, two AT&T Labs researchers, Richard H. Frenkiel and Joel S. Engel, **developed** mobile telephones.
- 3) Original is passive. Active: The beach cruisers **cause** physical problems that happen with all types of bikes.
- 4) Original is active. Passive: She **was required** to speak English at all times (by the teachers).
- 5) Original is passive. Active: Almost every individual **knows** Apple, Samsung, and Nokia as three well-known companies in the smartphone market.
- 6) Original is active. Passive: Having corn in their diet **is considered** a blessing (by people) because of the values it has.
- 7) Original is active. Passive: The first airplanes **were invented** by the Wright brothers.
- 8) Original is active. Passive: More recently, mobile phones **have been used** (by people) to send a text message.
- 9) Original is passive. Active: Studying abroad **will force** the college student to practice the language.
- 10) Original is passive. Active: Many college students **have considered** studying abroad.

Advanced Practice

While all of the sentences are grammatically correct, what follows are suggestions for more generally effective stylistic choices. This effectiveness may change depending on the specific context of the sentence.

- 1) Often, the passive is preferred as the sentence emphasizes the fact that the crossbars were designed rather than emphasizing any doer. Also, knowing the doer of the action is not necessary to understand the main idea of the sentence. Using the active and inserting a doer narrows the scope of the action considerably and may exclude others who may have designed the crossbars.
- 2) Active (a) is preferred as this choice is the most concise, and it emphasizes the students' ownership of the questions. The other two options place more emphasis on the action of asking questions, which is wordy and not relevant to understand the main idea of the sentence.

- 3) The passive is preferred as the sentence emphasizes solving the problem that may lead to consequences for the Winter Olympics, and this is the main idea of the sentence. Using the active voice and inserting a doer narrows the scope of who or what may solve this problem and may exclude other relevant solutions. Or, the doer may also be unknown.
- 4) Active (b) is preferred as this choice is the most concise, and it clarifies exactly what the author is doing. This choice removes an imprecise verb (“talks about”) and avoids repeating “the author.”