

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.