

## Passive Voice

**Voice is a grammatical term** that "pertains to who or what serves as the *subject* in a clause"<sup>1</sup>.  
 Read the example below:

Subject                  verb                  object  
**The politician    kissed    the baby.**

The predominant word order pattern in English is SUBJECT-VERB-OBJECT (SVO)

There are two main "voices" in English: **active voice** and **passive voice**.

The sentence "The politician kissed the baby" is in active voice, because "the politician" begins the sentence and does the action. The "do-er" of the action is called the **agent**.

**Passive voice** occurs when the *object*, not the *subject*, is the agent:

subject                  verb                  object and agent  
**The baby    was kissed    by the politician**

### Forming Passive Voice

To form the passive voice, use the following equation:

*be verb (is/are/was/were) + the past participle form of the main verb.*

Type of Passive Voice	Example
passive voice (PV) + simple present	Paper <b>is made</b> in Tacoma
PV + present perfect*	Paper <b>has been made</b> in Tacoma
PV + present progressive*	Paper <b>is being made</b> in Tacoma
PV + simple past	This paper <b>was made</b> in Tacoma
PV + past progressive*	Paper was <b>being made</b> in Tacoma
PV + future modality	Paper <b>will be made</b> in Tacoma
PV + modals	Paper <b>can be made</b> in Tacoma

*\*less common in academic writing*

<sup>1</sup> Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 343

## Uses of Passive Voice

Below are two common reasons to use passive voice:

1) To describe an action for which the agent (or "do-er" of the action) is unknown:

*That Bank **was robbed** last week.*

2) When the agent is known but is NOT the topic of focus:

*"For Whom the Bell Tolls" is a novel set amidst the Spanish Civil War. It **was written** by Ernest Hemingway.*

In the example above, the novel--not Hemingway--is the writer's topic. So, the writer uses passive voice to keep the novel ("it") as the subject.

## Passive Voice in Academic Discourse

Academic writers often use passive voice to distance themselves from an action or result out of concern for academic discourse conventions (especially in science):

*Study participants were shown three images. Next, participants were prompted to describe their feelings about each image.*

Passive voice is common in formal academic discourse because the preference for avoiding first and second person pronouns (*I, we*) prevents writers from being the agents of their own actions:

***We** showed the participants three images.----> The participants **were shown** three images.*

## Verbs Frequently Used with Passive Voice in Academic Writing

make	see	find	consider
give	use	do	show

## Common Passive Voice Mistakes

Passive voice works only with **transitive verbs**, which are verbs that must link to an object (e.g. give: *She gave the book to a student.* English speakers would likely not say only "*She gave.*")

**Intransitive verbs**, such as *happen* and *occur*, cannot take objects, and therefore cannot be used in passive voice:

*This problem ~~was~~ happened in my country.*

*The change in climate ~~was~~ occurred in coastal areas.*