

PASSIVE VOICE

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Definition and Grammatical Mechanics

The concept of **passive voice** fundamentally relates to the thematic roles played by the participants in a verbal action and how those roles are mapped onto the grammatical structure of a sentence. In linguistic analysis, voice is a grammatical category that expresses the relationship between the verb and its arguments, namely the subject and the object. When a sentence is constructed in the passive voice, the entity that is typically the **recipient** or **patient** of the action--the one acted upon--is elevated to the position of the grammatical subject. This inversion of thematic roles contrasts sharply with the active voice, where the **agent**, the entity performing the action, occupies the subject position. Understanding this fundamental shift is crucial for analyzing how meaning is conveyed and how emphasis is strategically placed within discourse, moving the focus away from the actor and toward the outcome or the recipient of the event described by the verb.

Specifically, the passive construction dictates that the semantic patient of the action presents as the grammatical subject of the clause, while the semantic agent, if mentioned at all, is relegated to an optional adjunct, typically introduced by the preposition "by" or sometimes omitted entirely, resulting in what is often termed the **agentless passive**. For example, in the active sentence, "The editor corrected the manuscript," the editor (agent) is the subject and the manuscript (patient) is the direct object. When transformed into the passive voice, the sentence becomes, "The manuscript was corrected by the editor." Here, the manuscript, the recipient of the correction, becomes the grammatical subject, demonstrating the core mechanical characteristic of this voice. This structural manipulation is not merely an aesthetic choice but carries significant implications for information flow and rhetorical impact, particularly in formal communication settings where objectivity or displacement of responsibility is desired.

The grammatical mechanism underlying the passive voice often involves auxiliary verb constructions and specific morphological changes to the main verb. In English, the passive structure requires a form of the auxiliary verb "to be" followed by the past participle of the main verb. This mandatory inclusion of the auxiliary serves as the marker for the passive construction and distinguishes it structurally from other transitive verb forms. Furthermore, while the active voice prioritizes the performer of the action, the passive voice inherently foregrounds the result or the entity affected, which is why it is often preferred in contexts where the actor is unknown, irrelevant, or intentionally obscured. This mechanism allows speakers and writers to shift attention and manage the thematic importance of various elements within the sentence, thereby controlling the narrative focus and the psychological salience of the participants involved in the event.

Formation and Structure of the Passive Voice

The construction of a grammatically sound passive sentence requires two essential elements in

English: the appropriate conjugation of the auxiliary verb "to be" and the utilization of the main verb's past participle form. The auxiliary verb must agree with the new subject (the patient) in tense, number, and person. For instance, to convert the present simple active "The committee approves the budget" into the passive voice, one must use the present simple form of "to be" plus the past participle, yielding, "The budget is approved by the committee." The complexity increases when considering various tenses and modalities, such as perfect tenses ("The report has been reviewed") or modal constructions ("The policy should be implemented"), each requiring precise manipulation of the auxiliary chain to maintain grammatical integrity while achieving the passive transformation. Failure to correctly manage these auxiliary elements often leads to awkward or ungrammatical constructions that obscure meaning and hinder readability, a common issue in poorly edited professional documents.

The core structural transformation involves the demotion of the original active subject (the agent) and the promotion of the original active direct object (the patient). The promoted patient assumes the role of the grammatical subject, thereby governing verb agreement. The demoted agent, if included, is incorporated into a prepositional phrase, usually starting with "by," which functions as an optional adjunct. This adjunct status means the agent is no longer syntactically required for the sentence to be complete, allowing for the widespread use of the agentless passive. This structural flexibility is a hallmark of the passive construction and provides writers with significant control over what information is prioritized. For example, in scientific writing, the focus is typically on the experimental process and results rather than the individual researcher; therefore, "The data were collected" is preferred over "We collected the data," structurally emphasizing the process itself.

It is important to differentiate between true passive constructions and stative or adjectival uses of past participles, which can sometimes appear superficially similar. A true passive indicates an action or process and includes the auxiliary "to be" plus the past participle, often allowing for the inclusion of the "by" phrase (e.g., "The window was broken by the storm"). In contrast, a sentence like "The window is broken" may often be a stative construction, describing the current condition of the window (broken being an adjective), rather than focusing on the action of breaking. Although this distinction might seem subtle, it has implications for linguistic analysis, especially concerning aspect and temporal reference. Linguists typically employ tests, such as attempting to add the "by" phrase or continuous aspect, to confirm whether a structure functions as a true verbal passive or a descriptive, adjectival state. Recognizing this difference is crucial for effective editing and parsing complex sentence structures.

Psycholinguistic Implications and Processing Load

The use of the passive voice carries measurable **psycholinguistic implications** regarding how sentences are processed and understood by the reader. Research suggests that passive constructions often impose a slightly greater cognitive processing load compared to their active

counterparts. This increased load stems primarily from the non-canonical mapping of thematic roles to grammatical functions; the listener or reader must mentally invert the semantic roles--identifying the grammatical subject as the patient and the object of the prepositional phrase as the agent--which requires an extra step of cognitive decoding. While native speakers process simple passive sentences quickly, this marginal increase in processing time becomes significant in complex, embedded, or lengthy clauses, potentially contributing to comprehension difficulties and reading fatigue, particularly when the text is dense or technical.

Furthermore, the psychological saliency of the sentence elements is fundamentally altered by the passive voice. In most languages, the subject position is the position of highest prominence, setting the stage for the sentence and serving as the primary focus of attention. By promoting the patient to the subject position, the passive voice directs the reader's attention immediately toward the entity affected, deemphasizing the actor. This manipulation of attention can be rhetorically powerful but must be used judiciously. If a text consistently buries the agent or crucial actor in a prepositional phrase or omits them entirely, the reader may struggle to build a complete mental model of the event, especially if tracking multiple agents across several sentences. This is particularly relevant in narrative contexts where clear causal links and accountability are paramount to story comprehension and character tracking.

The cognitive effort associated with the passive voice is also linked to expectations regarding canonical word order. English speakers generally anticipate a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order where the subject is the agent. When the passive voice disrupts this canonical expectation, the brain expends additional resources to resolve the structural anomaly and assign the correct thematic roles. However, research also indicates that when the passive voice is used to maintain thematic continuity--that is, when the patient has already been established as the topic in previous discourse--it can actually facilitate processing by linking new information to old, established topics. Therefore, the processing difficulty of the passive voice is not absolute but is highly dependent upon the surrounding textual context and the coherence of the overall discourse structure. When used strategically to maintain topic flow, the passive voice can be an efficient tool for managing information load.

Rhetorical Functions and Strategic Usage

Far from being merely a clumsy alternative to the active voice, the passive voice serves several critical **rhetorical functions** that justify its existence and continued use in specialized discourse. The primary rhetorical purpose is to control emphasis and focus. By placing the patient or the result of the action in the initial, subject position, the writer ensures that this element receives maximum attention and prominence. This is invaluable when the action itself, or the entity acted upon, is significantly more important than the identity of the actor. For example, a historian might state, "The treaty was signed in 1919," prioritizing the historical event over the specific individuals

who signed it, which may be assumed or irrelevant to the immediate discussion. This function allows for sophisticated management of textual cohesion and thematic weight, guiding the reader's interpretation of key information.

Another crucial function is the strategic omission or demotion of the agent, particularly in contexts requiring objectivity, evasion, or delicacy. The use of the agentless passive allows writers to describe actions or occurrences without assigning explicit responsibility or blame, achieving a tone of neutrality. This is frequently observed in political rhetoric and corporate communications where accountability might be intentionally obfuscated (e.g., "Mistakes were made"). Furthermore, in contexts where the agent is generic, unknown, or universally understood, the passive voice efficiently streamlines the sentence by removing redundant information (e.g., "English is spoken worldwide"). The strategic deployment of the passive voice thus becomes a powerful tool for modulating tone, managing responsibility, and achieving conciseness when the actor provides little informational value.

Finally, the passive voice plays a structural role in maintaining sentence flow and establishing topic continuity across sentences and paragraphs. When a discourse segment focuses on a single entity or concept, the passive voice allows that entity to remain the grammatical subject, even when it shifts from being the recipient of an action to the agent of a subsequent action, thereby minimizing jarring shifts in focus. This maintenance of topic continuity is vital for textual coherence and readability, especially in complex academic or legal documents. The skillful use of the passive voice ensures that the flow of information is logical and predictable, contributing significantly to the overall perceived authority and professionalism of the writing, provided it is not overused to the point of obscurity.

Contexts of Use and Misuse: Professional Applications

The passive voice finds highly functional and necessary application across various professional and academic fields, particularly in scientific, technical, and legal writing, though its specific utility is often debated. In **scientific reporting**, the passive voice is traditionally favored because it aligns with the epistemological goal of focusing on observable phenomena and objective processes rather than the subjective actions of the researchers. Standard methodology sections often rely heavily on the passive voice to describe experimental procedures (e.g., "The samples were heated to 100 degrees Celsius") because the procedure itself, which must be replicable, is the essential element, not the researcher who executed it. This convention reinforces the ideal of scientific impartiality, though modern guidelines often encourage a balanced approach to improve clarity and engagement.

In **legal and official documentation**, the passive voice is frequently employed to emphasize the actions or consequences related to laws, regulations, or policies, often displacing the agent to

maintain focus on the legal subject. The observation that "Police officers commonly dictate victim and witness statements in a passive voice" reflects this tendency, as the focus of the statement is the event that happened to the victim (patient), not necessarily the actions of the perpetrator (agent) or the dictating officer. However, in legal contexts, excessive use of the agentless passive can sometimes lead to ambiguity regarding accountability, which necessitates careful drafting to ensure that legal responsibilities remain clear, even when the structure prioritizes the actions performed or suffered.

Conversely, overuse or misuse of the passive voice constitutes a frequent criticism in general writing instruction. When the agent is crucial for understanding causality or responsibility, its demotion or omission via the passive voice leads to vague, indirect, and sometimes evasive prose. This stylistic weakness is often corrected during editorial review, particularly in business and journalistic writing where clarity and directness are paramount. Misapplication typically occurs when writers default to the passive voice without considering its rhetorical effect, resulting in sentences that lack vigor and hide necessary information, contributing to the perception that the passive voice is inherently weak or cowardly. Therefore, expert content generation requires recognizing when the passive structure genuinely enhances focus versus when it merely muddles the message.

The Agentless Passive and Its Effects

The **agentless passive** is a specific construction where the semantic agent--the entity performing the action--is entirely omitted from the sentence structure, making it impossible to determine who performed the action based solely on the text. This feature is achieved because the "by" phrase containing the agent is syntactically optional in passive constructions. The agentless passive is perhaps the most powerful and controversial manifestation of the passive voice due to its capacity to radically simplify sentences while simultaneously obscuring accountability. When the agent is truly unknown, unimportant, or redundant (e.g., "The lights were turned off at midnight"), the agentless passive is highly efficient. It allows the communication to proceed directly to the information relevant to the patient and the action performed, prioritizing conciseness and focus.

However, the rhetorical effect of intentionally suppressing the agent can be profound. In psychological and political discourse, the agentless passive is a well-known linguistic mechanism for evading responsibility. By constructing a sentence like, "The funds were mishandled," without specifying *who* mishandled them, the speaker describes a negative event while deflecting blame away from the responsible party. This rhetorical move shifts the psychological emphasis entirely onto the negative outcome, avoiding the potentially damaging association between the actor and the action. Analyzing the use of the agentless passive often provides insight into the speaker's attempt to manage perception, particularly when sensitive or controversial topics are discussed where transparency might be politically or socially costly.

Linguists and communication experts frequently advise against indiscriminate use of the agentless passive in situations where clarity regarding responsibility is paramount, such as ethical reporting or procedural documentation. While the agentless passive can streamline text, persistent use forces the reader to actively infer or guess the missing agent, leading to potential miscommunication or frustration. Effective writing demands a careful calibration of information density; if the agent is essential for the reader's understanding of causality or accountability, its deletion through the agentless passive constitutes a stylistic and often factual error. Therefore, the decision to employ the agentless passive must be justified by the context--either the agent is genuinely irrelevant, or the rhetorical goal is explicitly to focus solely on the patient and the event.

Critiques and Prescriptive Grammar Debates

The passive voice has long been the subject of intense debate within prescriptive grammar circles, often being labeled as inherently weak, clumsy, or evasive. This widespread criticism largely stems from the stylistic tendency of overuse, where writers employ the passive voice without strategic justification, leading to prose that feels indirect and unnecessarily wordy. Critics argue that the passive construction adds unnecessary auxiliary verbs and prepositional phrases, increasing sentence length and decreasing the overall impact and dynamism of the writing. For instance, "The decision was made by the board" is often criticized as being inferior to the more direct and vigorous "The board made the decision." This preference for the active voice is deeply ingrained in many writing style guides, aiming to promote clarity and concise expression, particularly in non-academic prose.

This prescriptive bias, however, often overlooks the legitimate and necessary rhetorical functions of the passive voice. When the primary goal is thematic continuity or the emphasis of the patient, the passive voice is structurally superior to the active voice. The blanket condemnation of the passive voice fails to account for contexts like scientific methodology, where impartiality is paramount, or legal drafting, where the subject of the law must be the focus. Linguists generally recognize that the passive voice is a fundamental grammatical resource of English, and its effectiveness is determined by its contextual appropriateness rather than its intrinsic grammatical form. Therefore, the modern editorial approach advocates for judicious use: eliminating the passive only when it obscures meaning or unnecessarily increases wordiness, but embracing it when it serves a clear rhetorical or structural purpose.

Furthermore, the debate surrounding the passive voice often intersects with discussions of linguistic clarity and ease of comprehension. While the active voice generally facilitates faster processing, the passive voice can sometimes lead to greater ambiguity, especially when multiple potential agents exist or when the relationship between the subject and the action is complex. Educators and editors must navigate the tension between teaching clarity and recognizing grammatical necessity. The goal is not to eradicate the passive voice entirely--an impossible and

counterproductive task--but to teach writers how to analyze their audience and purpose to determine whether the resulting passive construction enhances or detracts from the intended communication. Mastery of voice involves understanding both its structural mechanics and its psychological impact on the reader.

Summary of Voice Functions

To summarize the complex role of voice in English grammar and discourse, it is useful to itemize the distinct functions served by the passive construction compared to the active voice. While the active voice prioritizes the actor and promotes directness and vigor, the passive voice allows for sophisticated manipulation of focus, emphasis, and responsibility. The strategic advantages of the passive voice make it an indispensable tool for achieving specific rhetorical goals, particularly in formal, objective, or technical writing where the agent is often secondary to the action or the result.

Key functional uses of the passive voice include:

Topic Maintenance: Ensuring that a previously established entity remains the grammatical subject to maintain textual coherence and continuity.

Focus Shift: Prioritizing the patient or the outcome of the action by promoting it to the subject position, thereby directing the reader's attention.

Agent Obscuration: Intentionally or necessarily omitting the agent when the actor is unknown, irrelevant, generic, or when political or psychological evasion of responsibility is desired.

Impartiality: Maintaining an objective tone, especially in scientific and procedural writing, by focusing on processes and results rather than human agency.

Ultimately, the effective deployment of the passive voice requires an expert understanding of its grammatical mechanics and its subtle psychological and rhetorical effects. It is a powerful structural tool that, when used deliberately, enhances clarity and manages information flow; when used carelessly, it leads to the very vagueness and verbosity that critics often condemn. Mastery involves moving beyond the simplistic prescriptive rule of "avoid the passive" toward a nuanced understanding of when and why this grammatical structure is the most appropriate linguistic choice.