

When to use the passive voice

Verbs can be active or passive. In the active voice, the subject is the doer. In the passive voice, the subject is the person or thing affected by the action of some other agent.

The government approved the policy. (Active)

The policy was approved by the government. (Passive)

There is nothing wrong with a passive construction, but if you can express the same idea using an active verb, you should do so. Passive forms show an unwillingness to shoulder responsibility. In several passive constructions the doer of the action is not mentioned at all.

My father built this house. (Better than 'This house was built by my father.')

The passive voice is common in academic writing; however, it should be avoided in persuasive writing.

Don't mix active and passive structures in the same sentence. If one clause is in the passive voice, the other, too, should be in the passive voice.

Cases where the passive voice is preferred

There are a few situations where the passive voice is particularly helpful.

The passive voice is used when we want to draw attention to the person or thing that was affected by the action of the subject.

The unidentified victim was run over by a speeding truck.

Here the focus is on the person who was acted upon.

The passive voice is also preferred in cases where the doer is not important.

The pyramids were built around 400 AD.

Here the focus is on the pyramids and not on the person(s) who built them and hence we prefer the passive voice.

Passive Verb Formation

The passive forms are created by combining a form of be with the past participle form of the main verb.