Writers use the **active voice** when the subject performs the action of the verb. The **passive voice** is used when the subject of the sentence is acted on by the verb or receives its action.

**ACTIVE:** The dog bit the boy.
**PASSIVE:** The boy was bitten by the dog.

Sometimes sentences in the passive voice omit the “real” subject, the actor or doer of the action.

**PASSIVE:** The boy was bitten.
**PASSIVE:** The decision was made.
**PASSIVE:** The election was held.

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### TO SPOT THE PASSIVE VOICE

Look for a form of “to be” (is, was, are, is being) before the verb:
- The boy **was bitten** several times.

Look for a “by the…” phrase which includes the real doer of the action:
- The decision was made **by the committee**.

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A few reasons to avoid the passive (adapted from *Writing Well*, Donald Hall and Sven Birkerts):

**The passive voice can subtract meaning from your writing.**
- It suppresses identity:
  - A message was received. → We don’t know who received the message.

- It avoids responsibility:
  - The vase **was broken while Mom was out**. → We don’t know who is guilty.
  - Bombs were dropped on the targets. → We don’t know who takes responsibility.

**The passive voice can water down your argument.**
- It can be assumed that the test sample was faulty.
  - Who assumes this—the writer or others? Based on what evidence?
- The conclusion drawn from this study is a negative one.
  - Who makes this conclusion? Why?

**The passive, says Hall, can make you sound “as if [you] wrote labels for medicine bottles,” attempting to make a nonscientific subject sound more “credible.”**
- Crest has been shown to be effective at preventing cavities.

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In some circumstances the passive may be the preferable choice:

**Certain disciplines, especially the sciences, often use the passive for a sense of objectivity.**
- The experiment was conducted ten times with the same results.

**The passive voice can be useful in when the identity of the person doing the action is unknown or unimportant:**
- The house was broken into over Labor Day weekend.
- The shipments were delivered on time.

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*Writing at Bates*