

Grammar Help Sheet: Active and Passive Voice

We often have the choice of making a noun either the subject or the object of a sentence. If we choose the typical word order-subject-verb-object or subject-linking verb-complement, the verb which we use is in the active voice.

John saw an automobile accident.

“Saw” is in the active voice because the subject “John” performs the action. When the subject of the verb is the doer of the action mentioned in the verb or is in the condition stated by the verb, the verb is in the active voice.

An automobile accident was seen by John.

The subject “accident” is acted upon by John and the verb is said to be in the passive voice.

Active Voice

We bought a new kitchen table.

He wanted another chance.

Passive Voice

A new kitchen table was bought by us.

Another chance was wanted by him.

The subject of the active verb becomes the object of the preposition when the verb is changed from the active to the passive voice. The object of the active verb becomes the subject of the passive verb.

The passive form is generally a form of the verb “be” and a past participle.

Tense	Active	Passive
Present	He reads the book.	The book is read by him.
Past	He read the book.	The book was read by him.
Future	He will read the book.	The book will be read by him.
Present Perfect	He has read the book.	The book has been read by him.
Past Perfect	He had read the book.	The book had been read by him.
Future Perfect	He will have read the book.	The book will have been read by him.

Use the active voice when the subject is the doer. Use the passive voice when the subject receives the action.