

## Bring life to your writing: active vs. passive voice

### Active voice

Make the active voice your default mode of writing. In the active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action. A sentence in the active voice is direct and clear.

#### Example

subject — action  
performs the action

The mail carriers distribute the advertising circulars.

### Passive voice

In the passive voice, the subject of the sentence receives the action. Sentences in the passive voice are dull and more difficult to understand. They are also a major source of wordiness. Restrict your use of the passive voice to its few useful purposes, such as when you want to emphasize the person or thing acted upon.

#### Example

subject — action  
receives the action

The advertising circulars are distributed by the mail carriers.

### How to recognize the passive voice

Passive sentences always have some form of the verb “to be” (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been) plus a main verb that usually ends in “-ed.” Passive sentences may state who or what performs the action, as in the example above (“by the mail carriers”), but often do not, as in the example below.

form of “to be”    main verb with -ed ending

↑                    ↑

The advertising circulars are distributed.



A message from the Instructional Materials Developers in the Learning and Teaching Centre.

*Increasing student engagement with clearer content*