Active Voice

Active Voice - a direct way of stating an idea. When using active voice, the subject precedes the verb and performs the action designated by it.

*The chef filleted the wild salmon and then seasoned it with black pepper.*
*The car salesman identified the wealthiest looking customer on the lot.*

In both of these examples, the subject (chef and salesman) act out the verbs (filleted/seasoned and identified).

Passive Voice - an indirect way of stating an idea. When using passive voice, the subject follows the verb or does not appear in the sentence at all. In this case the verb is acted upon by an unknown entity or by a subject that placed within a prepositional phrase.

*The wild salmon was filleted and then seasoned with black pepper.*
*The wealthiest looking customer on the lot was identified by the car salesman.*

Both examples are expressed in passive voice. The first has no subject to complete the action, so all that the reader knows is that the salmon was filleted and seasoned. There is no information about who or what filleted the salmon. In the second sentence, the subject appears within a prepositional phrase; the most common preposition used in passive voice is *by*.

Identifying passive sentences:

The use of a be-verb (be, am, is, are, was, were, been) can in many cases show that a sentence is in passive voice. This is not always the case though. A really simple way to see if a sentence that uses a be-verb is passive is to attach the phrase *by zombies* to the end of it.

*The flower was planted in the garden.*

There is a be-verb in this sentence, so attach the phrase *by zombies* in the sentence to see if it fits.

*The flower in the pot was a lily.*

*The flower was planted in the garden by zombies.*
The first sentence doesn’t make sense with the phrase by zombies, so it is not in passive voice. This sentence uses the be-verb to show that the flower and the lily are the same thing, but there was no action in this sentence other than that.

The second sentence makes sense with the added prepositional phrase, so it is in passive voice. To make it active, you need to figure out who or what would fit in the prepositional phrase and then make this the subject of the sentence. Let’s assume this flower was planted by the lady next door.

\[
\text{The flower was planted in the garden by the lady next door.}
\]

Then take the lady next door out of the prepositional phrase at the end and place her in front of the verb without the helping be-verb.

\[
\text{The lady next door planted the flower in the garden.}
\]

**Reasons to use active voice:**

Active voice is . . .

- More descriptive and more direct than passive voice.
- Easier to understand than passive voice because it is more concise; there are fewer words and they are put together in a simpler way.
- Useful when giving readers all of the information they need to understand who or what is completing an action.

Passive voice is useful because it convenient and is sometimes necessary, but active voice is normally the more effective choice when writing.