

## THE WRITING CENTER

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<http://www.bryant.edu/ace>

Call ahead for an appointment with a student Writing Consultant or a professional Writing Specialist.  
Drop-ins also welcome and accommodated whenever possible.

### Defining the Passive Voice

A passive construction occurs when you make the object of an action into the subject of a sentence. That is, whoever or whatever is performing the action is not the grammatical subject of the sentence. Take a look at this passive rephrasing of a familiar joke:

*Why was the road crossed by the chicken?*

Who is doing the action in this sentence? The **chicken** is the one doing the action in this sentence, but the chicken is not in the spot where you would expect the grammatical subject to be. Instead, the road is the grammatical subject. The more familiar phrasing (why did the chicken cross the road?) puts the actor in the subject position, the position of doing something—the chicken (the actor/doer) crosses the road (the object). We use active verbs to represent that "doing," whether it be crossing roads, proposing ideas, or making arguments.

Once you know what to look for, passive constructions are easy to spot. Look for a form of "to be" (*is, are, am, was, were, has been, have been, had been, will be, will have been, being*) followed by a past participle. (The past participle is a form of the verb that typically, but not always, ends in "-ed." Some exceptions to the "-ed" rule are words like "paid" (not "payed") and "driven." (not "drived"). Here's a sure-fire formula for identifying the passive voice:

**form of "to be" + past participle = passive voice**

**For example:**

*The metropolis has been scorched by the dragon's fiery breath.*

**Evaluate**

- Is the doer/actor indicated? Should you indicate him/her/it?
- Does it really matter who's responsible for the action?
- Would your reader ask you to clarify a sentence because of an issue related to your use of the passive?
- Do you use a passive construction in your thesis statement?
- Do you use the passive as a crutch in summarizing a plot or history, or in describing something?
- Do you want to emphasize the object?

**Revise**

- If you decide that your sentence would be clearer in the active voice, switch the sentence around to make the subject and actor one. Put the actor (the one doing the action of the sentence) in front of the verb.

*The dragon scorched the metropolis with his fiery breath.*