



Palm Beach Atlantic University
Center for Writing Excellence

AVOIDING PASSIVE VOICE

Verbs can be either active or passive. In the active voice, the verb owns a subject that does the action (e.g. “**Billy ate** a lizard” - subject in green, verb in blue). In passive voice, there is no subject committing the action; instead, the subject is acted upon (e.g. “The lizard **was eaten**” - verb in blue). When passive voice can be avoided, do so. This will lead to a livelier paper—a paper that gets up on its own two feet and jumps around; a paper in passive voice doesn’t really do anything. It just *happens*.

Here are some examples of moving from passive to active voice:

Passive: “The new project was agreed on by the committee.”

- *In this example, “project” is a subject being acted upon*

Active: “The committee agreed on the new project.”

- *With this organization of the sentence, the subject becomes “committee,” the group doing the action.*

Passive: “I was startled by the sudden outburst.”

Active: *This can be improved in two different ways. We could find a subject who created the outburst:*

“Thomas startled me by his sudden outburst.”

Or, “Outburst” could become the subject:

“The sudden outburst startled me.”