

Choice of active and passive structures

An English verb can be in the active voice or passive voice. It is said to be in the active voice when it says what people or things do. It is said to be in the passive voice when it says what happens to people or things – what is done to them.

Read the following sentences.

Uma wrote this book in 1955. (Active voice)

This sentence is in the active voice because it says what Uma did in 1955 – *she wrote a book*.

When a sentence is in the active voice, the subject is the person who performs the action.

Now read the following sentence.

This book was written in 1955. (Passive voice)

This sentence is in the passive voice because it says what happened to the book in 1955 – *it was written*.

Note that the object of the active verb becomes the subject of the passive verb. The subject of the active verb is not always mentioned in the passive voice.

Use of the passive voice

We use the passive voice when it is not necessary to say who performed the action. Passive verb forms are also preferred when we don't know or are not interested in saying who performed the action. In other cases, we usually use the active voice.